

**A Study of Popular Hong Kong Cinema from 2001 to 2004
as Resource for a Contextual Approach to Expressions of Christian Faith
in the Public Realm after the Reversion to Chinese Sovereignty in 1997**

YAM Chi-Keung

**Doctor of Philosophy
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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I study popular Hong Kong cinema through analysing specific films produced between 2001 and 2004. They are *Shaolin Soccer* (2001), *The Infernal Affairs Trilogy* (2002-2003), and *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004). My aim is to identify insights from these films in order both to interrogate and to inform the public expressions of faith by local Christians in the period after the reversion to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. In this thesis, these expressions of faith are represented by local Christian productions released in cinemas also between 2001 and 2004. Being the first detailed study of Chinese language film in the developing field of theology-religion and film, this thesis serves to extend the geo-cultural scope of this area of research.

Throughout this study I adopt a tripolar approach to theology which is simultaneously practical, contextual, and cultural. It starts with practical concerns and aims at informing Christian praxis; it is concerned with local issues and reflects on local practices; it regards the cinema as a cultural text and as resource for local theology. My film analysis draws upon a cultural studies approach which combines textual and contextual studies, and is enriched by extensive references to writings by local critics and audience members. Using this multi-layered approach, I scrutinise the top grossing local film of each year from 2001 to 2004 within its original sociocultural context of production and reception. The same approach is also applied to examine the Christian films.

At the heart of this thesis is my analysis of both Christian films and popular films. I demonstrate that the local Christian films exhibit a number of characteristics, which include: other-worldly spirituality; individualistic worldviews that focus on personal fulfilment; exclusive emphasis on marriage and the family; as well as disinterest from the social context and indifference towards the present. My contextual study on the development of Christianity in Hong Kong reveals that these characteristics mirror the popular theologies prevalent in many local Christian communities.

In contrast, the popular films are often perceived locally to be implicit representations of circumstances after the reversion of sovereignty, and are thus regarded as stories of Hong Kong people and society. I discuss how these films address important issues which confront the people, take the local cultural-religious traditions seriously, assume the point of view of the marginal, and embrace rather than condemn human weaknesses. As cultural texts, they suggest that the people of Hong Kong are struggling with unresolved identities and anxiety over being marginalised, grappling with the tension of retention versus abandonment of collective memories, and longing for transformation from their perceived perpetual despair. These characteristics, I contend, are manifestations of a collective state of liminality experienced by many people in Hong Kong after 1997.

In the conclusion, I propose a contextual approach to public expressions of Christian faith for Hong Kong under Chinese sovereignty. My proposed approach involves attentiveness and humility toward local cultural-religious traditions; relocation to the periphery for the assumption of a marginal perspective; identification with and embrace of the liminal condition of the people. Finally, I suggest that the challenge for public expressions of Christian faith in this context is two-fold. First, it is to be able to tell the stories of post-1997 Hong Kong; second, these stories need to be grounded on a sound theology of liminality which embodies and addresses the post-1997 experience in the city. This specific study on Hong Kong cinema also has wider implications for those seeking to express their Christian faith in the public realm, particularly through various popular audiovisual media.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis in its entirety is the result of my own original work, and has never been presented to any institution for any degree or other qualifications. I assert the right to be identified as the sole author and bear full responsibility for the content.

Yam Chi-Keung

NOTES ON THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF PRIMARY SOURCES IN CHINESE

Citations from books, articles and lines from films:

Whether in the form of paraphrase or direct quote, they are my own translation. In the case of lines from films, I have referred to the English subtitles on the DVDs, but often have to make substantial adjustments to make them as literal as possible (that is, as close to the original Cantonese meanings as I understand them).

Names of people:

I try to follow their commonly used English names to the best of my knowledge. In the event that I need to translate their names, I mostly follow the Hong Kong convention of translating Chinese names from Cantonese pronunciation. Where the person in question is from outside of Hong Kong, the globally adopted *hanyu pinyin* (漢語拼音) scheme is adopted.

Titles of books and articles:

Whenever available, I follow the English titles of Chinese books and articles provided by the publishers or authors / editors. In other cases, the English titles are my translations. In both cases, the original title in Chinese characters is shown immediately after the translated title in the bibliography.

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While this thesis is solely the product of my own research and writing, I owe a lot to many people who have made its completion possible. The acknowledgements here can only express a tiny part of my heartfelt gratitude.

Dr Jolyon Mitchell, my supervisor, coached me through every stage of the process with his detailed criticisms, warm encouragements, and not the least his encyclopaedic grasp of the field of theology-religion and film study. In the early stage of this project, he pulled me back to a well defined territory on Earth from (in his words) 'talking about the Universe'. At one point when I lost confidence and became disoriented, he patiently, gently, but forcefully pushed me through the hurdles.

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The generous arrangement of Prof. Lo Lung Kwong enabled me to maintain association with the Divinity School of Chung Chi College at the Chinese University of Hong Kong during my study in Edinburgh. I could thereby take advantage of the research resources at the Chinese University, especially its outstanding Hong Kong Study Collection, during my several occasions of short stays in the city.

My journey in pursuing this doctorate, though utterly lonely, has been

blessed in different ways by the friendship and generous help of many, whether in Edinburgh, Hong Kong, or elsewhere. It is not quite possible to individually name all those who have enriched my life with good food, drinks, books, DVDs, posters, red packets, blog comments, chats, care, and love. Having said that, I must thank in particular Wenyi, Enlin, Jialing, Guo-an – the original formation of our 'North Sea Communitas'. They have lit up the final third of my journey to an extent probably greater than they were aware of, and certainly in ways that I never expected. Additionally, Angelo, my computer, has also been a loyal companion and assistant.

On top of everybody else, of course, the support from all in my family must be mentioned emphatically. During these years of my absence, they took up extra burden in taking care of our senile mother, in addition to a lot of other things. Apart from that, whenever I was home, the energetic little fellows – Siu Hung, Dabsuet, and Baksek, both cheered up my spirit and challenged my patience. While Dugjai the solemn thinker, Dor Dor the naughty poet, and Ngor Yao the persevering hero were not able to share my joy at the finishing line, they had always been and will always be in my fond memory. Above all, Sun, who had to confront crisis after crisis of all kinds and solved one problem after another all on her own, deserves my deepest gratefulness and indebtedness that are beyond what human language can express.

While my mother may not fully understand what I study, I nonetheless owe my earliest exposure to film, media, and theology to her. My earliest memory of cinema-going was watching a foreign film with her, and I can still remember its translated Chinese title was 《霸海奪金鐘》; she bought our first television set at home, on which I watched numerous old Cantonese films; and when I asked how the world came into existence, 'created by God' was her answer even though she was not a practising believer of any religion at that time. I am thankful that, despite her gradually deteriorating physical health in recent years, she is able to witness the endpoint of my doctoral study.

To my beloved mother, Madam Leung Ching Chun, I therefore dedicate this thesis.

Yam Chi-Keung

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Chapter One

Introduction

1A. Nature and Purpose of this Study

This thesis is a study of popular Hong Kong cinema through analysing specific films produced between 2001 and 2004. The aim of this film analysis is to identify insights from the popular cinema to interrogate and inform public expressions of faith by local Christians. With these insights from the cinema, I intend to propose a contextual theological approach to the expressions of Christian faith in the public realm, which is appropriate to the sociocultural context in contemporary Hong Kong under Chinese sovereignty. As such, the cinema is studied as a resource for contextual theology.

Within the wider concern for public expressions of Christian faith, I regard cinematic productions by local Christian groups as a representative form of such expressions. Henceforth, in addition to analysing the popular films, I also scrutinise locally produced Christian films from the same period for the sake of identifying the theological characteristics of the expressions of faith that they represent.

It should be emphasised, however, that studying the popular cinema as a resource for contextual theology does not imply a total embrace, endorsement, or celebration of everything that is represented in the commercial films. Although I positively focus on lessons that Christian praxis can learn from them, I do acknowledge that certain aspects of my sample of films deserve to be critiqued from

a theological perspective, such as the indulgence in violence, and the lack of a long term view in the representation of hope. It is mainly the limit in space that prohibits me from going into elaborate criticisms of them in the course of discussion.

1B. Hong Kong as a Focus of Study

The decision to use Hong Kong as the focus of this study is based on the following reasons. First, reversion of the city to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 makes it an exciting experiment in many respects, including the societal, cultural, religious, in addition to the political and economic, dimensions. In the particular case of Christianity, it is confronted with huge challenges under the altered socio-political reality in which the churches, as a tiny minority in the society, no longer enjoy the privileges bestowed by the former colonial government. Though no undermining of religious freedom in the formal or legal sense is evidenced, there is nonetheless the need for local Christians to rethink their approach to expressing faith in this changed, and still changing, context. Nevertheless, substantial explorations concerning the expressions of faith by local Christian communities in this altered situation is yet to be seen.¹ This thesis is an endeavour in that direction, with a special emphasis on the cinema as an arena of expressing faith. In a broader sense, it is a critical and reflective investigation into the self expression of the Christian church in a media-rich society which is in the midst of subtle but fundamental societal changes.

¹ There are certainly plenty of discussions, with various emphases and of different scales, on doing ministry in the early twenty first century in different Christian circles in Hong Kong. One visible example is a 'Statement of Mission' issued in July 2004, initiated by a group of Christian leaders associated with the Hong Kong Church Renewal Movement and signed by a number of other church ministers. Yet, active and continued discussions along the line is not evidenced. On an academic theological level, to the best of my knowledge, no substantial work has yet appeared that investigate the public witnessing or expressions of faith by local Christians in the post-1997 era.

Second, the changing economy of Hong Kong cinema since the end of the twentieth century also provides an interesting case worthy of attention. Having been the largest production and export centre of Chinese language films for two decades since the late 1970s,² the city's film industry began to experience downturn in the late 1990s.³ The shrink in market (indicated by box office income) and productivity became even more conspicuous in the beginning of this century.⁴ It is, however, during this period that a number of most-watched local films in the history of Hong Kong have been made. As I shall further elaborate in my methodology section (1C), these films constitute the subject of analysis in the core part of my thesis.

Third, during the same period a number of feature films produced by local Christian groups have been commercially released. They are concrete examples of

2 The first traceable published academic work on Hong Kong cinema was written by a British sociologist: I.C. Jarvie, *Window on Hong Kong: A Sociological Study of Hong Kong Film Industry and its Audience* (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1977). It was, however, two decades later that Hong Kong film began to attract the attention of more film scholars working outside of Hong Kong. Some of the important works published in English in this area include: David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000); Poshek Fu and David Desser, ed., *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Law Kar and Frank Bren, *Hong Kong Cinema: A Cross-Cultural View* (Oxford and Landham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2004); Meaghan Morris, et. al., ed., *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema* (Hong Kong and Durham, North Carolina: Hong Kong University Press / Duke University Press, 2006); Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions* (London: British Film Institute, 1998); Esther C.M. Yau, ed., *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

3 An important issue related to this phenomenon of downturn but outside the scope of this thesis is the prospect of Hong Kong film in relation to the Chinese language cinema in mainland China and elsewhere, which may lead to a changing face and changing definition of Hong Kong cinema. This and some related issues have attracted the attention of some scholars of media and cinema studies, and recently culminated in a month-long workshop on the trans-border development of Chinese language commercial cinema, hosted by Chinese University of Hong Kong in February 2008. Source: Eric Ma (馬傑偉), 'Will There Still be Hong Kong Film Ten Years from Now?' (十年後還會有港產片嗎?), *Mingpao Daily News*, Forum, 17 March 2008.

4 According to figures from the local Motion Picture Industry Association (MPIA), up to the mid 1990s, Hong Kong produced an average of more than 300 feature films annually; in 2002, only 92 local films were produced and released; the figure decreased to 79 in 2003 and 51 in 2006.

popular expressions of Christian faith in public and can constitute the basis for comparison with the mainstream commercial cinema. Moreover, to the best of my knowledge, these Hong Kong Christian films have never been studied academically.⁵

Finally, the choice to study Hong Kong is also due to my personal background as a native of that place. I have worked there as a media practitioner for about two decades, starting as a trainee scriptwriter under a major commercial television station and eventually became the person in charge of audiovisual media production and programming in a Christian organisation. This background indicates my long term involvement in the interaction between the Christian faith and various popular media. At the same time, it is also out of this experience that I become seriously interested in exploring how the public expressions of faith can take shape in ways that are sensitive and appropriate to a given sociocultural context.⁶

While the reasons above justify my study of Hong Kong, the question still remains: Why specifically the period from 2001 to 2004? This choice can be understood in terms of the popular cinema, the Christian films, and the overall social situation. In the popular cinema, notwithstanding the overall downturn of the city's film industry, the top grossing local films in the history of Hong Kong to date were all released within that short period of time. For Christian films, coincidentally, it was also a time when they were by far most active in production and commercial

5 Elsewhere, I have published an article on Hong Kong Christians' interaction with television, which shares a number of common characteristics with the Christian film productions. See: Yam Chi-Keung, 'Engagement in Television by Protestant Christians in Hong Kong', in *Studies in World Christianity (Special Issue on Christianity and Television)* 11.1 (2005): 87-105.

6 Despite this background, I should emphasise that I have not been involved in whatever capacity in any of the film projects that are analysed in this thesis, and have never had any form of relationship with the groups or companies that produce them.

release. In the society at large, although the handover of sovereignty formally happened in 1997, many of the social, economic, and political consequences were relatively inconspicuous until after a few years. Between 2001 and 2004, Hong Kong people saw some of the most critical moments of their society in four decades.⁷ The interplay of these factors makes Hong Kong in the first few years of the twenty first century even more exciting as a subject for research.

1C. Methodology: a Cultural Studies Approach to the Cinema

At the core of this thesis is the in-depth study of a representative sample of popular Hong Kong films from recent years, supplemented by the analysis of a sample of feature films produced by local Christian groups during the same period. The methodology I use to study films can be characterised as a cultural studies approach to the cinema, which in essence is multidimensional, utilises a combination of textual and contextual analyses, for the purpose of arriving at a fuller understanding of the films in question. It not only shares the concerns of cultural studies, especially British cultural studies,⁸ but also borrows some of the latter's method in studying social artefacts and cultural products.⁹ In the field of film studies or cinema studies, cultural studies approaches have become more prominent since the latter part of the 1990s.¹⁰ It forms part of what Turner identifies as a 'new agenda

7 The most serious was the outbreak of the SARS epidemic in spring-summer of 2003, during which the whole city almost came to a standstill. See discussion on the film *The Miracle Box* in Chapter 3.

8 According to Graeme Turner, some of the major concerns of British cultural studies are text and context, audience, and identities. See his comprehensive overview in: *British Cultural Studies* (3rd edition) (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

9 Such as the classical study on the Sony Walkman by Paul du Gay, *et al.*, *Doing Cultural Studies: the Story of the Sony Walkman* (London: Sage, 1996).

10 In the mid 1990s, Andy Willis still observed that cultural studies was more interested in the study of other popular media and other aspects of popular culture than in film. See: Andy Willis, 'Cultural Studies and Popular Film', in *Approaches to Popular Film*, ed. Joanne Hollows and Mark

for film studies' which is influenced 'most significantly by cultural studies ... particularly ... British cultural studies', and describes as a 'paradigm shift'.¹¹ In the field of religion and film, a cultural studies approach has been advocated by a number of scholars, first by Miles¹² and then by Lyden.¹³ More recently it has been more fully demonstrated and exemplified in the work of Wright.¹⁴ Within the more specific area of theology and film, although the approach of cultural studies has not been explicitly engaged in major works to date, both Marsh and Deacy have argued for the necessity of looking at audience reception of films and have convincingly demonstrated its feasibility and benefit as well.¹⁵ This emphasis on audience reception is in fact one of the defining characteristics of a cultural studies approach. It echoes, in the field of media, religion and culture, with the works of Hoover,¹⁶ upon which Marsh draws. From a wider perspective, Marsh's and Deacy's emphases on audience reception is in fact part of the 'participative turn' that Mitchell has observed as one of the emerging trends in the study of media, religion and culture, including religion and film.¹⁷ These efforts toward a cultural studies approach in

Jancovich (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995). In just a few years' time, Jill Nelmes remarks that there was 'a shift away from Freudian and Lacanian theory towards a cultural studies approach'. See: Jill Nelmes, *An Introduction to Film Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 256.

11 Graeme Turner, 'Editor's Introduction', *The Film Cultures Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 7. Turner maps out the new agenda to be 'research into the cultural function of popular cinema genres, into audience reception and consumption of movies, and into a version of film history that is more interested in industry economics than the formation of a canon'. (7)

12 Margaret Miles, *Seeing is Believing* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

13 John Lyden, *Film as Religion* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003).

14 Melanie Wright, *Religion and Film: An Introduction* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

15 Clive Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004); Christopher Deacy, *Faith in Film* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

16 One recent example is Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), in which he examines how household media consumption intermingles with religious and cultural lives.

17 Jolyon Mitchell, 'Emerging Conversations in the Study of Media, Religion and Culture', in

theology-religion and film study will be further discussed in my next chapter on primary theoretical context.¹⁸

Adopting a cultural studies approach means that I put emphasis on both the textual and contextual aspects of the films rather than focusing only on analysing the film narratives. In the textual aspect, I do not limit myself to the more literary elements, such as plot, storyline, characterisation, and the like, which are the usual foci in many works in theology-religion and film.¹⁹ Rather, the use of film language or audiovisual elements constitute important parts of my discussion, which includes cinematography and visual design, mise en scène, music score, the choice of filming location, and other related elements. In addition, I also attend to the marketing or promotional aspects of the films when necessary. As Austin points out and has convincingly demonstrated in his study of the marketing of popular films, there is 'the internal mechanisms of the film text, promotional and journalistic discourses, and macro- and micro-social contexts in shaping the viewing frames'.²⁰

In the contextual aspect, I pay special attention to the immediate social circumstances of production and distribution of each film as well as its local reception, as indicated in the box office gross, responses from critics, audience, and

Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 337-350.

18 See Chapter 2 section C.

19 Similar observations are made by some other scholars, including Wright, *Religion and Film*, 22; and S. Brent Plate, 'Religion/Literature/Film: Toward a Religious Visuality of Film', *Literature and Theology* 12.1 (March 1998): 16-38.

20 Thomas Austin, *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 7. In this statement, he is specifically referring to his study on *Basic Instinct* (dir. Paul Verhoeven, 1992).

other media. Unless otherwise stated, box office figures are official figures from the Hong Kong Kowloon and New Territories Motion Picture Industry Association (MPIA). Reviews by critics include those published in major newspapers, magazines, and film review websites, and also in collected volumes of annual review. Audience responses include writings that are publicly available on the internet, such as posts on online discussion forums, personal web pages, and blogs.²¹ These are obtained from repeated instances of online search between 2005 and 2007, using a number of different search engines, including the Hong Kong version of both *Google Search* and *Yahoo! Search*. Concerning these writings by audience members, it should be noted that I have limited my sample mainly to those written during or close to the time of each film's original theatrical release. The purpose of this sampling decision is to look at reception and response during the cinema screening of the films, which often betrays unrefined interaction with the social circumstances of the time, and therefore can provide valuable insights into how the films are perceived within those specific contexts.

In terms of the sampling of films, the effect of my subjectivity is minimised as the selection is defined by market response to the films and not my personal taste. In practice, my sample from the popular cinema consists of the top grossing film from each year over the first few years of the twenty first century, specifically from 2001 to 2004. In chronological order, they include: from 2001, *Shaolin Soccer* (dir. Stephen Chow); from 2002 to 2003, the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy (dir. Andrew Lau and Alan Mak); from 2004, *Kung Fu Hustle* (dir. Stephen Chow). Likewise, the sample

21 A recent precedent of this approach of analysing audience writings available online is Deacy's use of users' comments in IMDb. See: Deacy, *Faith in Film*, 8-11.

of Christian productions is selected with a similar criterion. They are publicly released within the same time period (2001 to 2004), and are either the top grossing Christian film or the only one publicly released in that particular year. Hence the Christian films discussed in this thesis include: from 2001, *Life is a Miracle* (dir. Adrian Kwan); from 2002, *Return from the Other World* (dir. Henry Poon); from 2003, *The Source of Love* (dir. Stephen Shin); from 2004, *The Miracle Box* (dir. Adrian Kwan).

1D. A Tripolar Approach to Theology

While my purpose is to propose a contextual approach to public expressions of Christian faith, it should be emphasised that I do not intend in this thesis to offer a complete or comprehensive theological system. My theological construction can be characterised as a tripolar approach in which there are three equally important pillars – practical, contextual, and cultural. They are the defining features of the theological endeavour in this thesis and are directly related to the concerns that initiate this study. These three separate but interrelated aspects are discussed in the following pages.

1D.1. *Practical – begins with practical concerns, and aims at transforming practices*

The primary intent of my study is to interrogate Christian media practitioners concerning their communication with a predominantly non-Christian audience in a society where there is little cultural background in Christianity. Hence, the theological construction in this thesis is undertaken with a view toward informing

the praxis of Christian communities; it is thus primarily practical in nature and echoes with the concerns articulated in recent discussions in practical theology, such as Browning, Forrester, and Graham. Browning has characterised practical theology as that which 'begins with practical concerns'.²² Following this line of thinking, my practical concern in this study is the apparent lack of connectedness of some Christian media practitioners with the fundamental concerns of the people.²³ According to Duncan Forrester, practical theology is 'the theological discipline which is primarily concerned with the interaction of faith and behaviour'.²⁴ Consistent with this understanding, through this research I seek to inform and transform the behaviour of faith expressions in the popular media by Christians. In this sense, then, it also resonates with Elaine Graham's notion of practical theology as 'transforming practice'.²⁵

In other words, it is not my intent in this thesis to perform an exercise in philosophical argument or to present a comprehensive and tightly-knit theological system. Rather, it is to challenge the praxis of Christian communities in general and media practitioners in particular. To use the words of Martyn Percy as he sums up the nature of practical theology, I am 'more concerned with *phronesis* ... immersed in concrete situations than with *theoria*'.²⁶ The 'concrete situations' in the case of this

22 Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 4.

23 This will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

24 Duncan B. Forrester, *Truthful Action: Explorations in Practical Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), 10.

25 Elaine Graham, 'Practical Theology as Transforming Practice', in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. by James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 104-117.

26 Martyn Percy, *Engaging With Contemporary Culture: Christianity, Theology and the Concrete*

project are the circumstances in contemporary Hong Kong, as well as the disconnectedness of the Christian churches and Christian media practitioners from the collective concerns of the people. This thesis, therefore, serves as a means to inform the practices of Hong Kong Christians in their engagement with the popular media.

In addition to the purpose and end of this theological construction, the interdisciplinary nature of this study also contributes to locating it within the territory of practical theology. As suggested by Percy, the character of practical theology is its being 'essentially hospitable' and has a 'fluid methodology' which 'seeks conversation and partnership at every stage'.²⁷ Moreover, this project is interdisciplinary in a specific sense. I apply methodologies from cultural studies to the study of popular cinema, and then interrogate Christian praxis with the findings from this cultural cinema studies. In other words, this thesis not only brings different disciplines together but allows them to shed light on one another for explicit purposes – namely to arrive at a fuller understanding of situations and also to formulate practices that are more appropriate to those situations. This manner of crossing disciplinary boundaries echoes with Percy's concept of 'refraction' in practical theology,²⁸ though it is not identical to it. According to Percy, refraction is more than mere interdisciplinarity; its goal is to 'discover fuller ways of reflecting' on the situations or phenomena at hand, and 'not only gaining understanding *in* it, but

Church (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 14.

27 Percy, *Engaging With Contemporary Culture*, 11.

28 Percy, *Engaging With Contemporary Culture*, 10-12.

also *from* it'.²⁹ (original italics) Likewise, my theological lens on the films enables me to gain deeper insights into the popular cinema and simultaneously extract insights out of it to confront Christian media praxis as well as the implicit theology behind. As Percy puts it, '[r]efraction – as a strategy – allows disciplines and issues to pass through one another'³⁰ or 'interpermeate'.³¹

In short, the theological construction in this thesis is practical in the sense that it begins with concrete practical concerns, it aims at informing Christian praxis in the popular media, and that it is interdisciplinary in bringing insights gained from the cultural studies of the cinema to confront the implicit theology in such Christian praxis.

1D.2. *Contextual – concerned with local issues, reflect on local practices*

The second pillar of my approach to theological construction in this thesis is contextual. As the basic objective of this study is to challenge some of the prevalent Christian practices in local popular media by Christian groups in Hong Kong, the whole project is by nature a contextual exercise, and so is the theological construction it entails. In the spirit of contextual theology according to Stephen Bevans, in the theological endeavour of this thesis I strive to be 'reflective of our time, our culture, and our concerns'.³² Also in line with Bevans, I regard the effort to

29 Percy, *Engaging With Contemporary Culture*, 11-12.

30 Percy, *Engaging With Contemporary Culture*, 11.

31 Percy, *Engaging With Contemporary Culture*, 12.

32 Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Rev Ed (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2002), 5.

contextualise a 'theological imperative' that is 'part of the very nature of theology itself'.³³ That is to say, I do not intend in this thesis to propose a comprehensive theological system which attempts to be universally applicable. Instead, I confine myself to the present day experience of a specific time and space – Hong Kong in the period after 1997, and address issues that arise from it and are pertinent to it. In this sense, it resonates with Schreiter's description of local theology as an 'occasional enterprise' that is 'dictated by circumstances and immediate needs rather than the need of system-building'.³⁴ The circumstances and immediate needs that I address in this thesis are the situation of people living in Hong Kong in the early twenty first century, and also the lack of connectedness with this situation on the part of Christian media practitioners.

As Bevans has suggested, when developing a contextual theology, the issues of cultural identity, popular religiosity, and social change must be taken into consideration.³⁵ Likewise, in the theological construction of this thesis, I pay special attention to issues that are closely related though not exactly identical to these. As my discussion later in Chapter Seven can illustrate, the major issues that emerge are in one way or another connected to the question of identity of Hong Kong people, the altered socio-political circumstances that resulted from the change of sovereignty, and the popular sensibilities of cultural and religious traditions. Hence, the orientation of theological construction in this thesis resonates with the concerns of contextual theology.

33 Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 3.

34 Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1985), 23.

35 Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 25-26.

In short, the theological construction of this study shares some of the defining characteristics of contextual theology. It has as its starting point a local concern of contemporary Hong Kong, the praxis it seeks to inform is that of local Christian media practitioners, and the issues with which it grapples correspond to those that concern contextual theologies.

1D.3. *Cultural – popular cinema as resource for local theology*

In addition to being practical and contextual, the third major character of the theological construction in this thesis is its being cultural. This means that this theological endeavour, within the overall framework of the whole study, takes human cultural expressions seriously. Nonetheless, by defining it as a contextual exercise that takes the vernacular seriously, this study is being consciously differentiated from two of the most influential discussions in theology and culture in the twentieth century, namely H. Richard Niebuhr's typology of Christ and culture,³⁶ and Paul Tillich's theology of culture and his method of correlation.³⁷ Important though they have been for theological discussions on culture in the last century, their relevance for considering contemporary popular cinema in an East Asian context is limited.

As Yoder points out, Niebuhr's typology has been popular and influential over the second half of the last century both within and without the Christian

36 H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

37 Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959); *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

theological circle.³⁸ Despite its popularity and widespread influence, the framework is hardly applicable to the study of local popular culture because it exhibits a bias toward high culture, and its inherent understanding of culture tends toward the abstract rather than the vernacular. As Gorringer has noted, 'Niebuhr tends to elide the anthropological notion of culture with that of 'high culture'".³⁹ In the words of Deacy, his distinction between Christianity and culture is 'conspicuously abstract and a-historical'.⁴⁰ Its relevance for this study on contemporary Hong Kong cinematic culture and Christian praxis is also dubious, partly because, as Carter has suggested, it is deeply embedded in a Christendom worldview.⁴¹

Likewise, Tillich's theology of culture also lacks relevance for the purpose and subject matter of this study. Admittedly, Tillich might be 'the one who created the discipline 'theology of culture' ',⁴² when he delivered to the Kant Society in

38 According to Yoder, 'Few single works of theology could compare to H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* for popularity going beyond theological circles, for enormous formative impact upon ways other people think, and for great "holding power". Within just a few years of the appearance of this book, the terms it suggested, and the classification of various typical positions which it proposed, had become the common coin of contemporary thought, not only among specialists in Christian ethics but in many other circles as well.' See: J.H. Yoder, 'How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*', in Glen H. Stassen, *et. al.*, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1996), 31.

39 Timothy Gorringer, *Furthering Humanity: A Theology of Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 15. With extensive reference to Yoder (see previous footnote), Gorringer critiques Niebuhr's framework as being 'so vague ... that it cannot be falsified' (15), and that there is an '[a]bsence of a Trinitarian perspective' as well as an 'individualistic understanding of the Church' (16). In sum, Gorringer calls for this typology 'to be dropped' (16).

40 Christopher Deacy and Gaye Ortiz, *Theology and Film: Challenging the Sacred/Secular Divide* (Oxford and Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2008), 66.

41 Craig Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos, 2007). Carter criticises Niebuhr in details both in terms of rhetorical strategies and theological weaknesses (53-76). He identifies that 'Christendom is the unspoken assumption behind Niebuhr's typology' (71), and that the framework is flawed in several of its theological notions, including Christology, ecclesiology, view of creation, and trinitarianism. Yet unlike Gorringer (see footnote 39), Carter advocates a revision of the typology for a post-Christendom era instead of abandoning it altogether. This discussion, important though it could be, is beyond the scope of this thesis.

42 Kelton Cobb, *Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 98.

Berlin what he himself called his 'first important public speech'⁴³ under the title '*Über die Idee einer Theologie der Kultur*' (On the Idea of a Theology of Culture, 1919).⁴⁴ He was also probably the only theologian who was closely associated with the Frankfurt School, the predecessor of contemporary cultural studies.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, when it comes to grappling theologically with cinematic media of mass appeal, his 'strong aversion to popular culture'⁴⁶ cannot be overlooked. Due to this explicit negative view, there is an intrinsic incompatibility between his theology and the study of popular culture. Also, Tillich's method of correlation attempts to penetrate culture's artefacts and concerns 'to the level where an ultimate concern exercises its driving power',⁴⁷ then 'makes an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to these questions'.⁴⁸ In essence, the method of correlation poses certain notions in Christian theology as ultimate answers to existential questions that emerge from what is uncovered from culture.

In contrast, my approach in this thesis is to regard the cinema as a cultural text. This understanding entails two implications. First, it implies that the films are examined in their own right rather than being forced to fit into any preconceived

43 Tillich, 'Foreword', *Theology of Culture*, v.

44 Published as 'On the Idea of a Theology of Culture', in *What is Religion?*, edited by James Luther Adams (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

45 Cobb, *Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 97-100.

46 Cobb, *ibid.*, 99. Regardless of this, Cobb still maintains to use Tillich as a key foundation for constructing his theology of popular culture. I find his attempt to bend Tillich to this end less than convincing.

47 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol.1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 39.

48 Tillich, *ibid.*, 62.

theoretical or theological framework. Instead, the cultural text is used to interrogate Christian praxis of the expressions of faith. Second, it also implies that the films, as understood against their original sociocultural contexts, are regarded as being reflective of the social milieu and people's circumstances. Insights into this intricate relationship between the films and their sociocultural circumstances of production and distribution is brought about by my combination of textual and contextual studies of the cinema.

In short, my consideration of cinematic culture in this project stands apart from two influential theoretical frameworks in theology and culture from the twentieth century – namely Niebuhr's typology of Christ and culture as well as Tillich's method of correlation. While my objective in this project is not to propose a theology of popular cinema or popular culture, the cultural orientation of this thesis is mirrored in its methodology. By adopting a cultural studies approach to film, the popular cinema is regarded as a cultural text and thereby as resource for formulating local practical theology.

1E. Thematic Outline of the Thesis

This thesis consists of seven chapters altogether.

After this Introduction, in Chapter Two I undertake a review of the present status of the primary theoretical context of this project, namely the theological study of the cinema, which is itself closely related to the discipline of religion and film. In this rapidly developing field, I focus on discussing three main aspects that are

particularly pertinent to my thesis. They include the use of film as resource for theology, the development of cultural studies approaches, and the expansion of the geo-cultural scope of the field. I shall point out the continuities of my study with these recent trends, and how my thesis contributes to their further development.

Chapter Three is a critical evaluation of the Christian praxis of the expressions of faith in Hong Kong in the early twenty first century, as represented in films produced by local Christian groups. The purpose of this chapter is to develop an in-depth understanding of the existing practice in the field; this understanding is then to become a basis for comparison with the popular cinema of the same period, which will be discussed in subsequent chapters. Therefore it can also be understood as the practical theological context of the thesis. In this chapter, I shall review the birth of feature film production by Hong Kong Christian groups, and then critically scrutinise the sample of local Christian films produced and publicly released from 2001 to 2004. In the discussion of each film, I shall examine it within the ecclesial and social contexts of the time, explore its representation of reality, and consider the values it celebrates. The most crucial limitation that I identify in these popular expressions of faith is their lack of connectedness with the sociocultural context and the circumstances of the people at the time. I shall then locate this limitation within the wider context of Hong Kong Protestant churches and their theologies.

Chapters Four to Six, which constitute the core of this thesis, are individual critical discussions of the films in my sample of popular Hong Kong cinema from 2001 to 2004. Corresponding to the discussion on the Christian films, my examination of the popular films centres around their position in the society and

local popular culture, their nature as stories of Hong Kong people and society of the period (as manifestations of their representations of reality), as well as their visions of hope, which are often closely connected to the values they celebrate. Based on my textual and contextual examination, I find that these films, in a variety of ways and to different extents, have been claimed and owned by some Hong Kong people as stories of themselves. This claim of ownership, I contend, is a result of the films' covert representations of some of the fundamental issues that confront the people, as well as their close affinity to various aspects of the local cultural-religious sensibilities. Building on what is identified from the film analyses, I then conclude each chapter by suggesting their respective relevance for public expressions of Christian faith.

After the detailed discussions of contemporary Hong Kong cinema through three representative films, this thesis culminates in Chapter Seven. There I undertake a systematic synthesis of the major findings from Chapters Four to Six, and on that basis, propose a contextual theological approach to the expressions of Christian faith in the public realm for contemporary Hong Kong under Chinese sovereignty. The main features of this contextual approach include the attentiveness and humility toward local cultural-religious traditions, the social relocation of the expressions of faith to the periphery and the assumption of a marginal perspective, as well as identification with the liminal circumstances of Hong Kong people at the early twenty first century. At the core of this proposed approach, I suggest that Christian communities in Hong Kong need to be able to tell the post-1997 stories of the people and their place, and that these stories need to be informed by a solid post-1997 theology which takes the liminality of the people seriously.

To sum up, in this thesis I seek to critically explore the possible modes of expressions of Christian faith in the public realm that are compatible with the altered sociocultural circumstances in Hong Kong after the change of sovereignty. This is achieved through a theological study of the popular local cinema using a cultural studies approach, which is undertaken for the purpose of identifying insights and challenges to interrogate existing praxis of expressions of Christian faith in film. Through a critical reflection and reorganisation of the lessons learnt from the commercial films, I propose a contextual approach to expressions of Christian faith that is pertinent to the contemporary Hong Kong situation. In this process, I maintain an approach to theology that is at the same time practical, contextual, and cultural.

Since this project is by nature a theological study of the cinema, in the following chapter I shall embark on a review of the recent status of the field as the primary theoretical context of my study.

Chapter Two

Primary Theoretical Context:

Recent Status of the Theological Study of the Cinema

2A. Introduction

In accordance with the nature of this project which I have articulated in the previous chapter, in this part of the thesis I discuss the recent status of the theological study of cinema within the wider context of religion and film study. The purpose of this chapter is to consider how some of the recent discussions in the field can inform and enrich my study, and also to identify some of the ways in which my project can in turn contribute to the further development of the field. In the midst of the rapid development of the religious and theological studies of the cinema during the last two decades, it is far beyond the scope of this thesis to offer a comprehensive and exhaustive review of the field.¹ Hence within the growing body of literature, I focus particularly on those works that approach the cinema in manners which echo the direction and emphasis of my research, and are thus pertinent to the development of this thesis.

¹ Over the last ten years or so, a number of scholars have reviewed the development of the field with a variety of foci. Some of the more representative reviews include, in chronological order of publication: John R. May, 'Contemporary Theories Regarding the Interpretation of Religious Film', in *New Image of Religious Film*, ed. John R. May (Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed and Ward, 1997), 17-37; Steve Nolan, 'Towards a New Religious Film Criticism', in *Mediating Religion*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2003), 169-178; John Lyden, *Film as Religion* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003), 11-35; Terry Lindvall, 'Religion and Film' (two parts), in *Communication Research Trends* 23(2004): 4 and 24(2005): 1; Christine Kraemer, 'From Theological to Cinematic Criticism: Extracting the Study of Religion and Film from Theology', in *Religious Studies Review* 30.4 (October 2004): 243-250; Jolyon Mitchell, 'Theology and Film', in *Modern Theologians* (3rd Ed), ed. David Ford with Rachel Muers (Oxford and Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2005), 736-759; Melanie J. Wright, *Religion and Film* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 11-31.

As Mitchell and Plate suggest, the 'actual interrelation' between religion and film 'is very old'.² Although serious academic study of theology and film was not active until the 1990s, and most of the Christian writings on film published prior to that time often focused on critiquing the cinema for its alleged moral failure, attempts at theological dialogue with film did emerge in the 1970s. These include, most notably, works by Cooper and Skrade,³ James Wall,⁴ Neil Hurley,⁵ and Ronald Holloway.⁶ Cooper and Skrade opined that theology should respond to the search for meaning in popular culture, and Wall believed that the church should pay attention to the cinema's vision of reality instead of rejecting without first understanding it. Hurley suggested that what cinema could offer to theology was an expansion of the latter's vision of human nature; film could prepare the way for Christian values which could in turn complete the quest for meaning started on screen. Holloway, who proposed ten approaches to uncover the deeper meaning of films, believed that it was a way to arrive at better understanding of the human condition.

Whilst such theological discussions on film were comparatively rare during

² Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate, ed., *The Religion and Film Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 2. Part 1 of this reader, especially the three essays written by Christian ministers from 1910 to 1920, is revealing of the attitudes of church leaders to the early cinema. For further primary materials from the period, see: Terry Lindvall, ed., *The Silents of God: Selected Issues and Documents in Silent American Film and Religion, 1908-1925* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2001). For discussions on the early interaction between the Christian churches and the cinema, see also: Roland Cosandey, et al., ed., *Une Invention du Diable? Cinema des Premiers Temps et Religion*, (Sainte-Foy: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1992).

³ John Charles Cooper and Carl Skrade, *Celluloid and Symbols* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970).

⁴ James M. Wall, *Church and Cinema: A Way of Viewing Films* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1970).

⁵ Neil P. Hurley, *Theology Through Film* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970); Neil P. Hurley, *The Reel Revolution: A Film Primer on Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Book, 1978).

⁶ Ronald Holloway, *Beyond the Image: Approaches to the Religious Dimension in the Cinema* (Geneva: World Council of Churches with Interfilm, 1977).

the first ninety years of the history of the cinema, the last decade of the twentieth century saw the beginning of the rapid development of the field. In the mid-1990s Martin complained that he 'encountered silence' instead of an 'ongoing and stimulating dialogue' when he researched on religion and film.⁷ Only a little more than a decade later, Mitchell and Plate commented that the 'critical study of religion and film is *certainly* coming of age'⁸ (my italics) and that 'one of the most rapid areas of growth' in the field is 'related to theological and Biblical studies'.⁹ This new phase of upsurge began with the publications of *Biblical Epics* by Babington and Evans,¹⁰ as well as Jewett's and Kreitzer's first books in this area,¹¹ coincidentally all published in 1993. Concomitantly, this phase was also marked by two shifts. First, as Mitchell observed, there was 'a shift from pastoral concern about the impacts or benefits of film, to more sustained critical analysis by theologians'.¹² Second, there was a shift in the genres of film being studied. In contrast to earlier studies which mainly focused on European art-house films, popular Hollywood cinema became the main subject of many works. It appears that this shift has been so thorough over the last one and a half decade that recently Johnston has queried whether the study of theology and film is presently 'unduly influenced by popular culture, failing to take

⁷ Joel Martin, 'Seeing the Sacred on the Screen', in *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in American Film* ed. Joel Martin and Conrad Ostwalt (Boulder, San Francisco, and Oxford: Westview Press, 1995), 2.

⁸ Mitchell and Plate, 'General Introduction', in *The Religion and Film Reader*, 2.

⁹ Mitchell and Plate, 'Theological and Biblical Approaches to Analysing Film: Introduction', in *The Religion and Film Reader*, 297.

¹⁰ Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

¹¹ Robert Jewett, *Saint Paul at the Movies: The Apostle's Dialogue with American Culture* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1993); Larry J. Kreitzer, *The New Testament in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993).

¹² Jolyon Mitchell, 'Theology and Film', 753.

note of the excellence of less commercially viable movies'.¹³

In addition to these two shifts in focus, the field has also become more diversified in orientation. First of all, from the aforementioned works of Jewett and Kreitzer onward, there has been a continuous interest in studying the relationship between the Bible and the cinema. These include studies on the explicit cinematic representations of Jesus and Biblical stories as well as dialogues between biblical themes and film.¹⁴ Second, there were works that relate the cinema with classical themes in Christian theology. While many of these focus on using films to illustrate theological themes, there are also attempts to use films as resources for theological construction, and it is with the latter strand of works that I am more concerned in this study. Thirdly, besides studying the films themselves, other scholars endeavour to define the field either by proposing methodological approaches, by offering their theologies of the cinema, or more recently by broadening the geo-cultural scope of the field beyond European and US American films. I shall pay more attention to works in this category since they are more pertinent to the orientation of this thesis.¹⁵

Corresponding to my specific methodological and theoretical concerns in this thesis, and with reference to the wider field of religion and film, in this chapter I

¹³ Robert K. Johnston, ed., *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline* (Baker Academic, 2007), 17.

¹⁴ This category corresponds to Terry Lindvall's category of 'representational studies' in his 'Religion and Film'.

¹⁵ There are of course other important strands of works that belong broadly to the field of religion and film. The only reason that they are not discussed in this chapter is because they are beyond the scope and concerns of my thesis. For example, there is a huge area of studying Jesus films and Christ-figure film, represented by such important works including: Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed and Ward, 1997); and W. Barnes Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years* (Santa Rosa, California: Polebridge Press, 1997).

shall review the recent status of particular aspects in the field of theology and film. These include the use of film as a resource for theology, the development of cultural studies approaches, and attempts toward a wider geo-cultural scope of the field. Also, I shall point out the continuities and discontinuities between my study and these existing works, as well as the contribution of this project to the further development of the theological study of the cinema in these aspects.

2B. Toward Using the Cinema as Theological Resource

One major area in the study of theology and film is the use of cinematic works as resource for theological endeavours. While some scholars use film as illustrations of theological themes,¹⁶ a number of theologians have attempted to engage with the cinema as resource for theological reflection and construction. Such approaches, however, are not regarded as readily acceptable among some Christian circles.¹⁷ Henceforth some scholars who are involved in theology and film study endeavour to propose theological approaches to cinema, which in a way serve to justify the legitimate position of film within the theological enterprise.

Recent efforts by some theologians to construct theologies of the cinema should be understood as continuations of earlier projects such as those by Cooper and Skrade, Wall, Hurley, and Holloway. Despite the difference in focus and

¹⁶ For example: David S. Cunningham, *Reading Is Believing: The Christian Faith Through Literature and Film* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2002); John May, *Nourishing Faith Through Fiction: Reflections of the Apostles' Creed in Literature and Film* (Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed & Ward, 2001); Bryan P. Stone, *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2000). All three books relate films and literary works with the Apostles' Creed and are written explicitly with the purpose of Christian formation in mind.

¹⁷ For instance, Deacy mentions that discussion of theology and popular culture with divinity students is 'often met with derision and disdain'. See: 'Preface', in Christopher Deacy and Gaye Ortiz, *Theology and Film: Challenging the Sacred/Secular Divide* (Oxford and Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2008), x.

theological persuasions, a common thread among these recent attempts is their emphasis upon the legitimacy of regarding the cinema as a partner in theological enquiries. They stress that it is necessary and beneficial for theology to engage with film, as the latter can offer fresh insights to theology from outside the church. For example, Gallagher suggests from a Roman Catholic standpoint that for theology, film can be the 'forgotten or neglected partner approaching contemporary culture',¹⁸ and that the next phase of the grammar of theology is perhaps to be 'hammered-out in non-theological, even non-believing circles'.¹⁹ This notion is echoed by Eichenberger who calls for a 'theology from below' and expresses the need for a theology of image.²⁰

Among Protestant scholars, some of the major efforts in constructing theological approaches to the cinema have been undertaken by Marsh, Johnston, and Deacy. In his discussion of the possible contribution of film to theology, Marsh seeks to revise Tillich's theology of culture into a scheme of 'theology by negotiation' rather than by correlation.²¹ He proposes that upon interacting with film, theology can work out what to say about its major themes in the contemporary

¹⁸ Michael Paul Gallagher, 'Theology, Discernment and Cinema', in *New Image of Religious Film*, ed. John R. May (Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed and Ward, 1997), 156.

¹⁹ Gallagher, 'Theology, Discernment and Cinema', 160.

²⁰ Ambros Eichenberger, 'Approaches to Film Criticism', in *New Image of Religious Film*, 10-11.

²¹ Clive Marsh, 'Film and Theologies of Culture', in *Explorations in Theology and Film*, ed. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 21-34. Marsh argues that Tillich's theology of culture, with its method of correlation, has to be modified because it is 'too heavily controlled by theological needs'; its view of culture is 'too uniform' and 'too highbrow', leaving no place for popular culture (31). Marsh has become more critical of Tillich lately, and states that 'Tillich did not do enough with popular culture, and his correlationist model ... is too simple and apologetic in structure for a contemporary appreciation of how theology 'works' '. See: Clive Marsh, 'Theology and the Practice of Meaning-Making', in *Expository Times* 119, no.2 (November 2007): 73n.18. This echoes with my critique of Tillich articulated in the section on 'Tripolar Approach to Theology: Cultural' in my introductory chapter.

climate and be reminded of its public dimension, as the theological interpreter is brought face to face with relating the church and the world. At the same time, theology is also reminded that it is to do justice to the emotional and aesthetic side of human life. Moreover, being a medium of and for the people, the 'vulgarity' of film entails the raising of theological questions beyond the reach of the church. The interaction with film also reminds theology of its own 'ephemeral character', and it must plan for its own obsolescence rather than aiming to be valid for all times.²²

Marsh and Ortiz attempt to propose a critical, postliberal theology of film, which they regard as a form of 'popular theology' built on the incarnation paradigm, a theology which deals with the ordinary, in which God is 'tangled up with the ordinary, the mundane, the seemingly trivial'.²³ They suggest that for the incarnation model to work, the church must have a clear theological identity and an expectation of mutual critique. It is thus a challenge to 'theological elitism' in the spirit of theologies 'from outside the First World'.²⁴ This notion is echoed by Graham's essay in the same book, which talks about 'the sacred through the secular', that poses film as a means to question or shape theology and as a stimulus for theological construction. Graham also maintains that visual media such as film are crucial for doing theology today since in the present age there is the 'primacy of the visual'.²⁵

Approaching the issue from a different perspective, Johnston also touches

²² Marsh, 'Film and Theologies of Culture', 31-34.

²³ Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, 'Theology Beyond the Modern and Postmodern: A Future Agenda for Theology and Film', in *Explorations in Theology and Film*, 253.

²⁴ Marsh and Ortiz, 'Theology Beyond the Modern and the Postmodern', 255.

²⁵ David John Graham, 'The Uses of Film in Theology', in *Explorations in Theology and Film*, 35-43.

on the idea of theological construction outside of the church, or the cinema as a stimulus to theology, when he talks about ‘hearing God through non-Christians’.²⁶ He ambitiously aims at constructing a total scheme of studying the cinema from a Christian theological perspective, and offers six theological reasons why the cinema should be studied theologically. They are: the presence of God’s common grace in human culture; the task of theology to be concerned with the Spirit’s presence and work in the world; God’s being active in wider culture and speaking through all of life; the role of image in helping humans encounter God; the narrative shape of theology which makes it open to interaction with other stories; and the nature of constructive theology as a dialogue between the stories of God and of humans.²⁷ Albeit the difference in emphases and terminologies, these six theological justifications closely resemble Marsh’s five theological commitments for engaging in a critical dialogue with culture, which are: God’s being present and active in creation, in the world beyond the church; the importance of the church; the image of God in human beings; the creativity of God’s Spirit; and the concreteness of Christianity’s Christological concentration.²⁸

As a Protestant theologian writing primarily for Protestant readers, Johnston is boldly critical of the theological limitations of Protestants in dealing with the cinema. Summing up, he says, ‘The Protestant suspicion of the image, its reverence for the rational word, and its concentration on redemptive theology to the sometimes exclusion of creation theology have all combined to have a major dampening effect

²⁶ Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2000), 70-74.

²⁷ Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 63-86.

²⁸ Marsh, 'Film and Theologies of Culture', 29-30.

on this church's engagement with Hollywood.'²⁹ He therefore suggests that it is 'necessary for the Protestant church to recover a more adequate theology of image, one rooted in experience and grounded in creation itself'.³⁰

In addition to calling for a theology of image, Johnston also highlights the nature of Christian theology as story and as dialogue. He stresses that the core of Christianity is not creed or abstract philosophy but a story – God's story which 'begins in Genesis' and 'ends in Revelation', as well as the intersection of God's story with our human story. He states emphatically that 'if the church has concentrated too often on structure and ethics and dogma, then God's story will be heard in other venues, such as the movie theatre'.³¹ By statements such as this, he is essentially saying that theology, as the knowledge of God, is to be constructed outside of the church if the latter fails to take seriously contemporary cultural expressions, such as the cinema. Furthermore, the dialogical nature of theology is seen in the intersection between our stories and God's, and Johnston maintains that film has the potential to help us hear God in this intersection and thus is an important resource for theological reflection.³² Recently this dialogical nature is further expounded by Deacy who specifies that a 'two-way conversation' which 'allows both theology and film an equal voice' is 'an important way forward for the theology-film field'.³³ In their effort to dismantle what they call the 'demarcation between the

²⁹ Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 76.

³⁰ Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 76-77.

³¹ Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 80.

³² Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 82-86.

³³ Christopher Deacy and Gaye Ortiz, *Theology and Film: Challenging the Sacred/Secular Divide* (Oxford and Malden, Massachusetts, 2008), 67.

sacred and the secular', Deacy and Ortiz argue that film not only contains 'traces of theology', but that 'the cinematic medium itself is a prime and fertile repository for theological encounter and exchange'.³⁴

Besides seeking a legitimate position for film in theology, some theologians active in the area also engage with the cinema as resource for theological reflection and construction. One notable example is Deacy's continuous effort to use films to interrogate and sharpen the study of theology. In his early work *Screen Christologies*, for instance, he uses the films of Martin Scorsese as his main focus and probes into the genre of *film noir* to explore the notion of redemption.³⁵ More recently in a book chapter,³⁶ he suggests that films 'can themselves facilitate quite sophisticated theological activities',³⁷ and advocates the use of film to '(re)examine, critique, and challenge the efficacy of work of a number of prominent twentieth-century theologians',³⁸ such as Bultmann, Tillich, and Pannenberg. Continuing with what Marsh has undertaken a decade earlier,³⁹ Deacy and Ortiz in their recent co-authored book *Theology and Film* locate the dialogue between theology and film within the context of theology and culture, and consider film a 'necessary and vital element' in that discussion.⁴⁰ They apply their dialogical model to examine a number

³⁴ Deacy and Ortiz, *Theology and Film*, 200.

³⁵ Christopher Deacy, *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film* (Cardiff: University Of Wales Press, 2001).

³⁶ Christopher Deacy, 'From Bultmann to Burton, Demythologizing the Big Fish: The Contribution of Modern Theologians to the Theology-Film Conversation', in *Reframing Theology and Film*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007), 238-258.

³⁷ Deacy, 'From Bultmann to Burton', 239.

³⁸ Deacy, 'From Bultmann to Burton', 240.

³⁹ Marsh, 'Film and Theologies of Culture', especially 29-32. Deacy and Ortiz in fact claim their book to be a continuation of *Explorations in Theology and Film*, in which Marsh's essay appears.

⁴⁰ Deacy and Ortiz, *Theology and Film*, viii.

of issues that are relevant in the twenty first century and 'germane to theology',⁴¹ including such issues as women, the environment, violence, justice, war, and eschatology. By virtue of this approach, they emphasise that theologians should not distort the films to fit into a preconceived theological framework, but should instead be prepared to be challenged by the cinema.⁴²

Another important recent endeavour in using film as resource for theology is Marsh's *Theology Goes to the Movies*,⁴³ which is essentially 'a systematic theology through film'.⁴⁴ While Marsh calls it a 'workbook for students of theology and religious studies',⁴⁵ in the core part of the book he discusses, with references to and input from films, topics that are usually covered in works of systematic or dogmatic theologies – God, human being, Spirit, redemption, sacraments, church, eschatology, and Christology.⁴⁶ By drawing on films as resources, the book attempts to engage with the emotive and messy aspect of human life-experience and avoids packaging theology into a tidy framework. Even so, Marsh acknowledges there are drawbacks in using a framework of systematic theology,⁴⁷ and thus maintains that the systematic character of Christian theology should be 'best understood in terms of its

⁴¹ Deacy and Ortiz, *Theology and Film*, 79.

⁴² Deacy and Ortiz, *Theology and Film*, 211.

⁴³ Clive Marsh, *Theology Goes to the Movies: An Introduction to Critical Christian Thinking* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁴⁴ Marsh, *Theology Goes to the Movies*, part II.

⁴⁵ Marsh, *Theology Goes to the Movies*, 5.

⁴⁶ Each of all the topics constitute a single chapter except Christology, which permeates the discussions in many of the chapters. Marsh's reason for this arrangement is that Christian theology is Christocentric, See: Marsh, *Theology Goes to the Movies*, 157-158.

⁴⁷ Marsh, *Theology Goes to the Movies*, 161-169; especially his discussion on the 'systematic character of Christian theology' in 163-166.

coherence, rather than rigid (over-)structuredness'.⁴⁸

Despite the differences among them in fine details, the common ground that these theologians share is that they embrace film as a welcomed stimulus for theology, and thereby accept the idea of theology from the outside. This stance can be crisply summarised in two short sentences of Mitchell: 'Films can interrogate theology. The church has much to learn from specific prophetic films.'⁴⁹ The efforts of these scholars confirm the legitimacy of the cinema as theological resource, which is one of the basic cornerstones of this project. In this sense, there are close continuities between my concerns in this thesis and those of the scholars discussed in this section. At the same time, their insights also remind me of the ephemeral character and essentially contextual nature of theology, as well as the necessity for theology to deal with the triviality, vulgarity, and messiness of the mundane. As my subsequent chapters that analyse popular Hong Kong films (Chapters Four to Six) and my Conclusion (Chapter Seven) can indicate, these notions find resonance in the basic theological outlook of this thesis. Furthermore, while Marsh as well as Deacy and Ortiz are offering something that is close to systematic theology, my effort aims toward using film as resource for a practical theology that informs Christian praxis. In this sense, this thesis also further develops the theological study of film beyond the theoretical dimension of theology.

2C. Toward Cultural Studies Approaches to the Cinema

A second important aspect which is emerging in the field and which is

⁴⁸ Marsh, *Theology Goes to the Movies*, 166.

⁴⁹ Mitchell, 'Theology and Film', 755. This statement is valid albeit different people may have very different ideas of what constitutes a 'prophetic film'.

relevant to the methodological approach of this study is the increasing prominence of cultural studies approaches to cinema. As mentioned in my introductory chapter, this trend mirrors a similar one in film studies, in which the use of methodologies borrowed from cultural studies is becoming prominent since the late 1990s.⁵⁰ To date, however, it appears that scholars in the wider field of religion and film are more active in advocating and adopting such approaches than theologians involved in studying film. Cultural studies approaches to religion and film have been proposed respectively by Miles, Lyden, and Wright. Also, the attention to audience reception demonstrated by Marsh and Deacy in theology and film study shares some important characteristics of cultural studies. Their attempts are discussed in this section.

Miles' proposal of using a cultural approach to study the cinema in *Seeing and Believing* comes as a result of her choice to focus on studying popular Hollywood films instead of art-house films. This choice is based on her understanding that 'films that succeed at the box office are those that identify currently pressing social anxieties and examine a possible resolution ... the film played a role – provided a voice – in the clamour of public conversation'.⁵¹ With her cultural approach, she intends to study films as products of the culture's social, sexual, religious, political, and institutional configurations. As opposed to the film critic, whom she understands as primarily interested in the film text, her notion of the cultural critic is that of a 'historian of contemporary society' who studies the 'particular historical moment from which the film originates'.⁵² Besides film

⁵⁰ See my section on 'Methodology: A Cultural Approach to Film Analysis' in Chapter 1.

⁵¹ Margaret Miles, *Seeing is Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 18.

⁵² Miles, *Seeing is Believing*, 23.

contents, therefore, this approach would also study the 'life cycle' and 'cultural space' of a film. By life cycle Miles means the 'circuit' from production to distribution, reception, and to the film itself, whereas the cultural space of a film includes its 'digressions', referring to the advertising, interviews, trailers, and the like, which designate the film's topic and 'consumable identity'.⁵³

Although Miles might have pioneered the idea of a cultural approach to religion and film study, she has not put her proposed methodologies into sufficient use. Despite her own emphasis on the importance of the reception of films, she has not truly studied it. Instead, she makes *a priori* assumptions about how certain groups would perceive certain films, without undertaking or referring to any relevant studies; in other words, her representation of the audience's interpretation of films are only her own.⁵⁴ Moreover, despite the fact that popular film is her subject of study, Miles' attitude toward popular culture is in fact one of total rejection. As Lyden has pointed out, Miles is issuing unwarranted criticisms toward certain films by the assumption that all popular films are essentially hegemonic and oppressive in ideologies, which is in fact the idea of earlier 'mass culture' theorists.⁵⁵ Furthermore, for Miles, religion is so loosely defined that any issue is considered religious when it is connected to class, power, and gender; hence her cultural approach has been criticised as one that 'could [have] come from any humanistic discipline – there is nothing particularly 'religious' about it'.⁵⁶

⁵³ Miles, *Seeing is Believing*, 23-24.

⁵⁴ A similar critique is made by John Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, Rituals* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 28.

⁵⁵ Lyden, *Film as Religion*, 28-31.

⁵⁶ Greg Watkins, 'Seeing and Being Seen: Distinctively Filmic and Religious Elements in Film', in *Journal of Religion and Film*, 3.2(1999): 3. <<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/watkins.htm>> [accessed 10 April 2004].

In addition to criticising Miles' work for imposing the author's own view onto the audience, Lyden also comments that there is a common limitation in previous theological and ideological approaches to the study of religion and film. This limitation is that they cannot address the issue of how films function for the audience. As a corrective, he affirms that films are understood and interpreted only in the context of their actual viewing. Thus, within the context of his overall contention to regard the study of religion and film as an inter-religious dialogue,⁵⁷ Lyden calls for more ethnographical studies to be undertaken in order to understand how certain films are perceived by the audience.⁵⁸ He suggests that the cinema offers 'ritualised experience with religious power' for the viewer, 'a vision of the way the world should be' and 'statements about the way it really is', and that 'the ritual of film-going unites the two when we become part of the world projected on screen'.⁵⁹ Therefore, he contends, film fits perfectly into the functional definition of religion by Geertz.⁶⁰

Notwithstanding his call for ethnographic studies of film audience, Lyden

⁵⁷ The idea of regarding religion and film as an inter-religious dialogue has recently been mentioned by others, including Johnston (*Reel Spirituality*), Stone (*Faith and Film*), and Ostwalt (*Secular Steeples*), although it is Lyden who formally attempts to propose a method of study with this understanding. More recently, Lyden further elaborates on this notion in 'Theology and Film: Interreligious Dialogue and Theology', in *Reframing Theology and Film*, 205-218.

⁵⁸ Lyden, *Film as Religion*, 47.

⁵⁹ Lyden, *Film as Religion*, 4; 44-48.

⁶⁰ Clifford Geertz, 'Religion as a Cultural System', in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 87-125. Lyden defines religion in terms of three aspects: a story (myth) which conveys a worldview, a set of values (morals) about how the world should be, and a ritual expression which unites them. He contends that there is in fact no absolute distinction between religion and other aspects of culture, and that we might fail to recognise how film and other media function religiously if we insist on a specific and essentialist definition of religion. See: Lyden, *Film as Religion*, 3-4; 41-44.

however has not addressed the difficulty of studying film audience during their *actual* viewing. In a manner reminiscent of Miles, his discussions of the films are largely his own interpretive description of the stories and characters, together with his speculation on the possible reasons why the films appeal to certain groups. No evidence has been cited to substantiate his interpretation. His discussions on the genres are treatments on how individual genres have functioned in the USA, quoting and interacting with views of different scholars who have studied them. Lyden defends this shortcoming of the book by saying that the lack of information available 'has made some speculation about audience reaction unavoidable'.⁶¹ Still, it is likely that he has not made sufficient use of available materials, since most of the films he discusses are fairly recent and extremely popular, such as *Die Hard* (1988), *Terminator 2* (1991), and *Titanic* (1997), among others. Also, while he has mentioned the possible use of box office figures as an indicator,⁶² he rarely refers to it but often makes remarks such as 'very well received'. In short, Lyden has not delivered what he claims to be an important element in his proposed approach, thereby undermining his own criticism of others' lack of attention to the audience.⁶³

While both Miles and Lyden have only put what they advocate into limited practice, better developments of similar notions have been undertaken by other scholars. Notably, there is Wright who consciously positions herself as developing the proposal of Miles and puts forth a multi-dimensional approach to religion-film

⁶¹ Lyden, *Film as Religion*, 135.

⁶² Lyden, *Film as Religion*, 135.

⁶³ As mentioned above, Lyden criticises Miles for subjectively speculating the response from certain groups toward some films and imposing unwarranted interpretations on the films. See: Lyden, *Film as Religion*, 28-30.

study,⁶⁴ whereas some of the recent works in theology and film by Marsh⁶⁵ and Deacy⁶⁶ deal with the issue of audience reception of film. Among them, Wright is critical that many of the works in religion-theology and film do not have well grounded methodologies and therefore lack 'firm foundations'.⁶⁷ She rightly points out that the selections of films in those studies are often subjective and random, and stresses that the criteria for film selection in a project 'must be explicitly relevant to the problems in hand' and 'fit the project's overall aims'.⁶⁸ Notwithstanding the legitimacy of her critique, however, her criteria have not truly made her project immune from the problem of subjective bias. As she rejects the idea of using box office receipts as an indicator of significance and has not proposed other alternatives,⁶⁹ the decision regarding which films to include in a particular study is almost inevitably arbitrary, and there is little doubt that Wright herself has also exercised her subjective judgement. In addition to the issue of film selection, Wright is also critical of the general neglect of film language in studies of religion-theology and film, and questions whether film is 'really being studied at all'.⁷⁰ Henceforth, she seeks to fill this lacuna in the field by proposing a 'multi-dimensional approach', by

⁶⁴ Melanie J. Wright, *Religion and Film: An Introduction* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007). See her remark on her project's relationship to that of Miles' on p.29.

⁶⁵ Including: Clive Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment: Film's Challenge to Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004); 'On Dealing with What Films Actually do to People', in *Reframing Theology and Film*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids,, 2007), 145-161; 'Theology and the Practice of Meaning-Making', in *Expository Times* 119.2 (November 2007): 67-73.

⁶⁶ Including: Christopher Deacy, *Faith in Film: Religious Themes in Contemporary Cinema* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); 'Redemption Revisited: Doing Theology at Shawshank', in *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 21.2 (May 2006): 149-162.

⁶⁷ Wright, *Religion and Film*, 16.

⁶⁸ Wright, *Religion and Film*, 19.

⁶⁹ Wright, *Religion and Film*, 18. This notion is almost the opposite of mine in this study, in which I let the market (the audience) decide which films are to be analysed in depth.

⁷⁰ Wright, *Religion and Film*, 22.

which she aims at offering a 'richer account' of the films and develop 'an appreciation of their nature and functions as film "texts" operating within – and constructing – particular contexts'.⁷¹ In her book she lucidly demonstrates how her multi-dimensional approach works in actual practice in the discussion of films, which focus on four specific areas: the narrative, the style, the cultural and religious context, and reception.

Whilst Wright endeavours to offer and demonstrate a methodological framework for a cultural study of religion and film, Marsh and Deacy, as theologians, put their emphases on one important aspect within this overall direction, namely how films are received and interpreted by the audience. Marsh's main emphasis is to reflect theologically on the reception of film by the audience, and states that he is interested in 'what films do to people and what people do with film'.⁷² Echoing Lyden who suggests that going to the cinema is a ritualistic and religion-like activity, Marsh also suggests that film-watching is a theological activity that is highly religious.⁷³ He contends that certain characteristics of film as a medium and the film-watching experience – namely illusion, emotion, embodiment, visuality, and attentiveness – have significant implications for theology and in fact do challenge the latter into rethinking its character of being a rational and cognitive exercise.⁷⁴ For instance, he stresses that the emotional nature of film-watching can be a reminder to theological enquiry, which should pay more attention to the emotional aspect of life.

⁷¹ Wright, *Religion and Film*, 30.

⁷² Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment*, ix.

⁷³ Marsh acknowledges Lyden to be an 'ally' as he develops his position, though he is also critical that Lyden is sacrificing the 'integrity of theology'. See: Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment*, 6-7, 128-129.

⁷⁴ Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment*, 83-104.

According to him, 'visuality'⁷⁵ is closely interrelated with 'respect for emotion' and 'embodiedness', which together can build a theological endeavour that is 'multi-sensual' and 'has the chance to relate to the whole human person'.⁷⁶ Moreover, those three features of film – visuality, emotional stimulus, and embodiment – culminate in the attentiveness required for watching a film in cinema. This particular characteristic of cinema-going, Marsh further suggests, is therapeutic and also 'has the chance of being an exercise in practical theology'.⁷⁷ While defending as well as celebrating the sentimental aspect of popular film, he emphasises that the 'multi-sensual' and 'multi-perspectival' nature of film reminds theology that 'it must relate to the whole person, and not simply the head'.⁷⁸

By probing into what people do with film, Marsh's main focus is on the role of film-watching as a site of meaning-making in contemporary Western societies. Based on research conducted in the UK in the summer of 2004,⁷⁹ he observes, among other things, that 'entertainment is taking the place of religion as a cultural site where the task of meaning making is undertaken'.⁸⁰ He thus proposes that the

⁷⁵ This term of 'visuality', as Marsh acknowledges, is borrowed from S. Brent Plate, 'Religion / Literature / Film: Toward a Religious Visuality of Film', in *Literature and Theology* 12 (1998), 16-38. While Plate's article critiques the literary bias in theology and film studies, and argues for more respect for the visual aspect of film, Marsh's notion of visuality is a way of watching film that is sensitive to the images rather than determined by specific religious or ideological positions. See: Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment*, 98-101.

⁷⁶ Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment*, 101.

⁷⁷ Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment*, 102.

⁷⁸ Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment*, 115.

⁷⁹ Charlotte Haines Lyon and Clive Marsh, 'Film's Role in Contemporary Meaning-Making: A Theological Challenge to Cultural Studies', in *Reconfigurations: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Religion in a Post-Secular Society*, ed. Stefanie Knauss and Alexander Ornella (Vienna: Lit Verlag, 2008), 113-126.

⁸⁰ Marsh, 'On Dealing with What Films Actually Do to People', 150.

church has to resolve what to do in relation to film and how to participate in this meaning making in the changed context.⁸¹ In this regard, Marsh distinguishes between film-watching as an individual activity and cinema-going as a shared experience, and also emphasises the communal characteristic of doing theology. From this perspective, he adjusts his aforementioned list of characteristics of film-watching into five distinctive features of 'cinema-going as meaning-making' that are pertinent to the practice of theology in the church. These include being affective, demanding concentration and attention, being pleasurable, stimulating imagination, and being a shared experience.⁸² These features, he suggests, should also be shared by the theological enterprise and therefore the theologian is invited to 'look at where intense, life-shaping activities happen'.⁸³

Whilst Marsh concentrates on the theological implications of audience reception, Deacy's works in this respect not only argue for the necessity for theology to attend to how films are received by the audience, but also demonstrate a way to arrive at this understanding. Using *Shawshank Redemption* (1994) as an illustration, he is critical that many theologians who write about cinema often 'force particular readings on to a given film and then present such interpretations as normative'.⁸⁴ He therefore argues for the 'primacy of audience reception', stating that theologians should be ready to enter into conversation with the audience's interpretations 'irrespective of the quality of theological engagement' of the latter.⁸⁵ He calls for

⁸¹ Marsh, 'On Dealing with What Films Actually Do to People', 156-160.

⁸² Marsh, 'Theology and the Practice of Meaning-Making'.

⁸³ Marsh, 'Theology and the Practice of Meaning-Making', 73.

⁸⁴ Deacy, 'Redemption Revisited', 156.

⁸⁵ Deacy, 'Redemption Revisited', 155-158 (156).

those who work in this field to 'listen with patience, respect, and with a critical ear to the conversations that are taking place below the radar of the theologian's ivory tower'.⁸⁶ In addition to arguing for its importance and necessity, Deacy himself demonstrates in practice an approach of attending to audience's interpretation in his own work, and thereby refuting the ideas of some other scholars, such as Lyden, that such empirical data are hard to obtain. The approach he uses is to make use of the users' comments on a given film in the Internet Movie Database (IMDb).⁸⁷ Though they are not without limitations as empirical data, Deacy contends that they are 'of no less worth than what can be found in more traditional media', and that reviews that appear in those media do not necessarily carry 'more credence' than the IMDb users' comments.⁸⁸ He further suggests that as the internet is 'much less controlled and regulated' than print media, audience writings posted online could have the advantage of being more honest and authentic, as well as being more 'immediate, up-to-date and spontaneous'.⁸⁹

To sum up, recent works on religion or theology and film indicate that cultural studies approaches are gaining ground in the field. While Miles might be the first to propose the use of a cultural approach to religion and film, and Lyden has pointed to the need for ethnographic work on film audience, both of them fall short of delivering what they advocate. It is Wright who lucidly demonstrates her proposed multi-dimensional approach to the study of different films. In the more

⁸⁶ Deacy, 'Redemption Revisited', 162.

⁸⁷ Deacy, *Faith in Film*, 8-11.

⁸⁸ Deacy, *Faith in Film*, 9.

⁸⁹ Deacy, *Faith in Film*, 9-10.

specific area of theology and film, the concern for audience reception rather than the film text is championed, with different emphases, by Marsh and Deacy. Marsh focuses his efforts on wrestling with the implications of cinema-going as a theological practice, and Deacy argues, with the support of practical demonstration, the necessity and practicability of attending to audience reception. My cultural studies approach in this thesis, which combines textual and contextual analyses, bears similarities to Wright's multi-dimensional method. Also, though audience reception is not the main focus in this study, I do refer extensively to writings by audience members and critics in a manner that resonates with, though is not identical to, Deacy.

2D. Toward an Expansion of Geo-cultural Scope

In addition to the use of cinema as resource for theology and the emergence of cultural studies approaches, a third important phenomenon in the field is the gradual expansion of its geo-cultural scope. Earlier works published before the 1990s in theology-religion and cinema have mostly focused on European films. Then in the last decade there was a shift in focus to popular Hollywood productions. Until more recently, however, the subject matters of major works in religion and cinema are still predominantly films from both sides of the North Atlantic, and the field is still characterised by North American- and Eurocentrism.⁹⁰ This bias is a departure from the overall trend in film studies, which over the past few decades has exhibited increasing interest in cinemas worldwide.⁹¹

⁹⁰ One exception is Part 6 in John R. May, ed., *New Image of Religious Film* (Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed and Ward, 1997), which contains three chapters on African, Indian, and Latin American cinema. These essays are, however, merely brief overviews of the film industries in those areas.

⁹¹ See, for example: John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson, ed., *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), which devotes separate chapters on Indian cinema, Chinese cinema, Hong Kong cinema, Taiwanese cinema, Japanese cinema, African

Against this backdrop, the publication of Plate's edited volume, *Representing Religion in World Cinema*, represents an important effort in extending the geographical territory of the field.⁹² The book can be understood as a continuation of Plate's earlier attempt,⁹³ and he states that 'one of the reasons for assembling this volume on 'world cinema' is to provide an alternative voice to the Hollywoodcentrism that resides within religion and film circles'.⁹⁴ Paraphrasing Fredric Jameson's notion of the cinema as 'geopolitical aesthetic', Plate suggests that it might as well be understood as '*georeligious* aesthetic'.⁹⁵ (original italics) Though the editorial organisation of the twelve essays in the book tends to be arbitrary, the main interest of this volume lies in the diversity it represents. The essays are written from distinct perspectives on distinct subject matters, such as Hindu mythological film, Woody Allen film, Buddhism in Korean film, Pentecostalism and video-film in Ghana, Islamic apocalypse, as well as cinematic representations of postcolonial identities in the Philippines, Cuba, and New Zealand. Notwithstanding this diversity, there is however an obvious gap missing from this book on 'world cinema'.⁹⁶ It is

cinema, and South American cinema.

⁹² S. Brent Plate, ed., *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making* (New York and Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

⁹³ See: S. Brent Plate and David Jasper, ed., *Imag(in)ing Otherness: Filmic Visions of Living Together* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1999) which contains two essays on Indian films and one on Korean films.

⁹⁴ S. Brent Plate, 'Introduction: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making', in *Representing Religion in World Cinema*, 9.

⁹⁵ Plate, 'Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making', 1.

⁹⁶ It should be noted that I regard the term 'world cinema' as highly problematic because it is slippery. It means different things for people from different regions of the world. For instance, Europeans and North Americans often take it to mean films from Asia, whereas for people in East Asia it often means films from Europe and North America. The term is used here merely to reflect Plate's own use.

the silence on productions from the more established centres of filmmaking in East Asia, namely Japanese films⁹⁷ and Chinese language films.

Another significant step in the expansion of the field's geo-cultural scope is the subsequent publication of *Screening Schillebeeckx*.⁹⁸ Sison, as a Filipino theologian, brings into dialogue the eschatology of Schillebeeckx and the Third Cinema, and analyses a number of films from both the Americas and the Philippines. This book is, to the best of my knowledge, the first book-length study in theology and cinema to focus mainly on films from outside Europe and North America, and also the first one to be published by an East Asian scholar.⁹⁹

More recently, the publication of *The Religion and Film Reader* marks a significant milestone in expanding the geo-cultural scope of the religious study of the cinema.¹⁰⁰ In this collection of previously published writings, Mitchell and Plate work to 'push beyond the Christian theological and Euro-American approaches' that are behind many of the works in the field, and state that their aim is to 'historicise and globalise the scholarly approaches to religion and film'.¹⁰¹ This aim materialises

⁹⁷ Though one chapter in the book briefly discusses a Japanese film, *Ugetsu* (dir. Kenji Mizoguchi, 1953), it is mentioned as a variation on the myth of Orpheus. See: Linda Ehrlich, 'Orpheus on Screen: Open and Close System', in *Representing Religion in World Cinema*, 67-87; discussion of *Ugetsu* in 75-77.

⁹⁸ Antonio D. Sison, *Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue* (New York and Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

⁹⁹ Interestingly, possibly because that particular selection discusses the Cuban filmmaker Tomas Gutiérrez Alea, Sison's work is listed under 'South and North American Perspectives' (Part 3D) in *The Religion and Film Reader*, 269-275. Sison himself, however, is a Filipino Roman Catholic theologian.

¹⁰⁰ Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate, ed., *The Religion and Film Reader* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2007).

¹⁰¹ Mitchell and Plate, ed., *The Religion and Film Reader*, 4-5.

in a lengthy Part 3 on 'Global Perspective', which constitutes slightly more than half of the whole book.¹⁰² In it, there are substantial representations of African, Middle Eastern, Asian, Australasian, and South American perspectives, in addition to European and North American viewpoints. Even so, as the editors themselves admit, one of the 'glaring omissions' is the lack of representation from and discussion on Chinese filmmakers.¹⁰³ Mitchell and Plate suggest that a main reason behind this *lacuna* is the lack of religious representations in Chinese films due to official ideology and its internalisation by intellectuals and artists. I would contend, however, that what is really lacking is not the representation of the religious in Chinese language film but rather the availability of writings that discuss the issue of religion in Chinese films or discuss Chinese cinema from a religious perspective.¹⁰⁴ In this regard, my study of Chinese language films from Hong Kong is a first step toward filling that *lacuna*, and thus serves to expand the geo-cultural scope of the field in a specific sense.

¹⁰² The part covers 225 pages (pp. 67-293) out of a total of 444 content pages in the whole book.

¹⁰³ Mitchell and Plate, ed., *The Religion and Film Reader*, 71.

¹⁰⁴ It is true that for several decades of its rule over the mainland of China, the communist regime 'worked to eradicate religion and 'superstition' from cultural productions', and 'governmental ideologies made it difficult to finance films with explicit religion in them'. (71-71) This largely explains the lack of religious elements in films made in mainland China. Nonetheless I would suggest that implicit or even negative representations of religion, which do exist in those films, are also representations. Moreover, apart from the mainland, there are the Chinese language films from Taiwan and Hong Kong, which do not lack religious motifs. Thus, that which is lacking is the study on them rather than the films themselves. Also, as Mitchell and Plate point to the martial arts film as a 'significant qualification' to their observations quoted above, it should be noted that most of the martial arts films in the last century were produced in Hong Kong. While they quote Joachim Gentz who suggests that the cinematic depiction of mysterious Buddhist fighters in those films are used to subvert Confucian and Daoist values, I would contend that this interpretation by Gentz is an over-interpretation of the martial arts genre. I do not agree with Gentz's representation of the traditional Chinese cultural-religious sensibilities. In a traditional Chinese society, there is a long held notion of the organic synthesis of 'three religions' (*sanjiao* 三教: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism), which together form the basis of folk religions across different Chinese societies. In daily practice, the relationship among them is more often mutually complementary and syncretic rather than mutually exclusive or competitive. For a classical treatment of the role of religion in Chinese society, see: C.K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961).

2E. Conclusion:

Position of this Thesis within the Theological Study of the Cinema

In this chapter I have reviewed some aspects of recent developments in the theological study of the cinema, specifically in relation to my concerns in this thesis. These aspects include the use of the cinema as theological resource, the development of a cultural studies approach to theology and film, as well as the expansion of the geo-cultural scope of the field. I have also pointed out the continuities between my study and these recent developments in the field, and suggested how this project contributes to its further development in those specific aspects.

First of all, while I share the notion of using the cinema as resource for theology, this thesis extends that notion beyond the scope of theological *theoria* into *phronesis*. By the nature of this study, which aims at proposing a contextual theological approach to the public expressions of Christian faith, I seek to interrogate, inform, and transform existing Christian praxis. In this manner, the theological study of the cinema is applied to the area of practical theology.

Secondly, by adopting a multi-layered methodology which combines textual and contextual studies to scrutinise popular films, this thesis puts into practice a cultural studies approach to the theological study of the cinema. My approach bears some similarities to that of Wright but is not identical to hers; this study also goes beyond both Miles and Lyden by getting to what the audience themselves express about the films. In particular, in terms of understanding audience interpretation of

films, I concur with Deacy that 'it is not impossible to obtain voluminous, comprehensive, and incisive empirical data from 'ordinary' audience members. There is plenty of empirical data already available'.¹⁰⁵ While Deacy uses IMDb as his source of audience writings, I search through blogs, web diaries, and online forums from Hong Kong to gain understanding into responses of the local audience toward the films I study.¹⁰⁶ In addition to uncovering audience response, I also agree with the critique that many previous works in theology-religion and film are too bounded by literary theories and consider films as literary genres.¹⁰⁷ By attending closely to the film language, or the audiovisual aspects of film, this thesis is also a corrective to that deficiency in the field.

Thirdly, by its nature of being a theological study of Hong Kong cinema, this thesis is one step toward expanding the geo-cultural scope of theology and film study. By so doing, not only do I break the Euro-Americancentrism that has characterised theology-religion and film studies until recent years, but endeavour to bring the field into the uncharted territory of Chinese language film for the first time.

To sum up, this thesis is not only in line with some of the important recent developments in the theological study of film but also extends those developments in the following ways. First, I apply the field of theology and film into practical theology by engaging the cinema as a resource to inform Christian praxis. Second,

¹⁰⁵ Deacy, 'Redemption Revisited', 158.

¹⁰⁶ To the best of my knowledge, this is a relatively new attempt not only in theology-religion and film but also in the more established discipline of film study, including its emerging sub-discipline of audience research.

¹⁰⁷ For such critiques, see, for example: Nolan, 'Towards a New Religious Film Criticism', 177; Plate, 'Religion / Literature / Film'; Wright, *Religion and Film*, 22;

in developing a cultural studies approach to theology and film, I attempt a new way to understand audience reception through analysing their own writings that are published online. Third, I extend the geo-cultural scope of the field to Chinese language film and popular Hong Kong cinema for the first time.

Chapter Three

Expressions of Faith by Hong Kong Christians through the Cinema: a Critical Examination of Theological Characteristics

3A. Introduction

In late August, 1999, more than two million daily passengers on the underground Mass Transit Railway (MTR) in Hong Kong were able to see the conspicuous advertisements in all the stations which promoted ‘the first ever gospel film in the cinema’, *Sometimes, Miracles Do Happen* (天使之城). The film was produced by Media Evangelism¹ and was scheduled for regular showings in Cine-Art House from 9 September onward. Though it had already been shown in a number of churches around the city over the previous months, it was the first time ever in the history of Hong Kong that a local Christian production was on screen in a commercial cinema. Since this debut, at least one feature film produced by a Christian organisation was released in the cinemas annually over subsequent years, and ‘evangelistic film’ or ‘gospel film’ had established itself as a genre in Hong Kong cinema within merely a few years.²

¹ The Media Evangelism Limited was started by a group of young Christians and was incorporated in Hong Kong in 1991. Beginning its ministry with slideshows and multivision productions, it launched into producing video programmes and feature films a few years later.

² As Steve Neale points out, although ‘the definition and discussion on genre and genres in the cinema has tended to focus on mainstream, commercial films in general and Hollywood films in particular’, since the original plain sense of the French word is simply ‘kind’ or ‘type’, there is ‘no logical reason’ for excluding the non-American and non-commercial films. See: Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), 9. For application of the concept genre onto Hong Kong cinema, see: Law Kar *et al.*, *On Hong Kong Film Genres* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1997). While evangelistic films in Hong Kong might be merely injecting Christian messages into different film genres, the common feature that binds them together into a distinctive ‘type’ is their explicit and intentional Christian content.

The purpose of this chapter is to uncover the theological characteristics of this genre as a form of expression of Christian faith in public, with a view toward identifying some of the areas that need to be interrogated and enriched by the popular cinema. Corresponding to Marsh's position that film watching is a theological practice,³ my position in this thesis is that film producing is also a theological practice, which means that cinematic works are theological expressions of the filmmakers, albeit they are not always conscious of it. My contention in this chapter is that evangelistic films from Hong Kong are flawed by serious limitations in the theologies they exhibit, most notably escapism and individualism. These theological inadequacies are uncovered primarily by means of close textual studies of the films, supplemented by references to the context of their production, including the social, cultural, and religious or theological backdrops. When necessary, I also draw on available writings by film critics and members of the audience in order to understand how certain aspects of these films are perceived during their original release. More importantly, it should be noted that these films are not created in a vacuum but are essentially the product of the overall atmosphere of spirituality and theological outlook of a certain sector of the Protestant church in Hong Kong. Hence, the theological characteristics of the films are also to be understood as indicative of the same in the local church.

In the rest of this chapter, I shall first sketch out the brief history of film production by local Christian groups, and then embark on an in-depth study of the expressions of faith in a representative sample of four evangelistic films. Finally I

³ Clive Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment: Film's Challenge to Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004).

shall locate the theological characteristics of these films within the historical and contemporary context of Protestant Christianity in Hong Kong. My film sample consists of one film per year taken from 2001 to 2004. This time frame and mode of sampling corresponds exactly with the sampling of popular commercial films to be discussed in subsequent chapters. The Christian films to be analysed are, in chronological order of their original release, *Life is a Miracle* (dir. Adrian Kwan, 2001), *Return from the Other World* (dir. Henry Poon, 2002), *The Source of Love* (dir. Stephen Shin, 2003), and *The Miracle Box* (dir. Adrian Kwan, 2004). Since the first and last films in this list are from the same director and organisation (Media Evangelism), they display many similarities and will therefore be discussed consecutively. While *Life is a Miracle* was the most popular among the four Christian films in 2001,⁴ the other three were the only Christian films that were publicly released in their respective years, and were therefore the only choice available for the sample. My discussion of each film will centre around the following aspects: the film in its social and church contexts, the distinctive feature in its narrative or distinctive issue that it endeavours to address, its representation of reality, and its vision of hope.

3B. The Birth of Local Christian Cinema Production

Although Hong Kong is known to be one of the birthplaces of Chinese cinema in the first decade of the twentieth century⁵ and has developed a vibrant film industry of its own since the 1950s, no organised Christian involvement in the medium can be identified in those early days. Whereas a small handful of film actors

⁴ See figure 3.1 on p.56 for a full list of Christian films during that period.

⁵ Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 3.

from that period were known to be churchgoers,⁶ Christian influence on the cinema was not noticeable. The most well known relationship between the church and the film industry during those years was that large movie theatres were often rented by revivalists and evangelists as venues for mass rallies or even regular Sunday services.⁷

Subsequently, in view of the rapid development of local film and television in the 1970s, some Christian leaders in Hong Kong began to realise the possibility of what they called 'evangelistic audiovisual media'.⁸ However, due to the church's deficient background in the media, there was little Christian expertise or available capital to launch into sophisticated cinematic productions. Christian organisations could only perform small scale experimentations in the audiovisual media, such as slide shows, short films and videos. In terms of creative thrust, technical sophistication and financial investment, there was a wide gap between these small

⁶ Among Hong Kong film actors active in the 1950s, for example, Chi Lo-lin (紫羅蓮 [鄒潔蓮], also transliterated as Zi Luo Lian) was baptised in the Kowloon Methodist Church on Christmas Day 1955 and has been active in church ministries till now. Shek Kin (石堅, also transliterated as Shi Jian or Shih Kien, b. 1 January 1913) who has been an icon of villainy on the local screen for decades is known to be a member of the Baptist Church. Lo Lan (羅蘭 [盧燕英], also transliterated as Luo Lan, b. 1936) is a Roman Catholic and recently hosted a television documentary on her visit to the Vatican, in which the audience can see Pope Benedict XVI shaking hands with her (*On the Road: Faith, Hope, and Love in the Vatican*, broadcast on TVB Jade, 24-27 April 2006). The most legendary Christian figure in the film industry in that era was Mui Yee (梅綺 [江端儀], also transliterated as Mei Qi, 1923-1966), who left her acting career, became a charismatic preacher and established her own pentecostal denomination called The New Covenant Church in 1963.

⁷ Famous Chinese evangelists and revivalists, including Andrew Gih (計志文), Chao Shi-kuang (趙世光), Chao Chun-ying (趙君影), have held numerous rallies and services in several cinemas during their transitional stay in Hong Kong after fleeing from mainland China in late 1940s throughout the 1950s; see: Ying Fuk-tsang, *Introduction to Christian Church History of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary, 2004), 112-118. In fact some Hong Kong Christians from that generation still have vivid memories of those events.

⁸ In 1983, a consultation hosted by the Chinese Coordination Centre for World Evangelisation (CCCOWE) on 'The Gospel and Mass Communication' was held in Hong Kong. Participants were from Chinese churches and Christian media organisations in different parts of the world, mostly Hong Kong and Taiwan. One of the tracks of discussion was film and television, in which participants discussed their ideas of making evangelistic films and television programmes. The discussion was not seen to have carried on since then. The consultation is not known to have made any considerable influence on subsequent thinking and praxis of Christian cinematic attempts.

projects and full scale feature film productions. Christian audiovisual ministries were not comparable with the remarkable advance in the local film industry throughout the 1980s. Although Christian media practitioners were already thinking and talking about involvement in feature film production in those days, it was the ambitious move of Media Evangelism toward the late 1990s that materialised this idea.

From the mid 1990s onward, Media Evangelism has produced a number of video dramas that are explicitly evangelistic in nature. The majority of these programmes were shown in evangelistic gatherings held in different churches and subsequently sold as VCDs. With its first feature length video film *Master Chef* (地茂廚神, dir. Adrian Kwan, 1998) the organisation formally tried out full scale cinema production and distribution. At that time Media Evangelism cooperated with a number of churches in different districts across the city to arrange for no less than sixty showings over a period of several months. By promoting the endeavour as the ‘evangelistic cinema circuit’, it experimented with feature film distribution in its own way and consolidated its relationship with the churches to pave the way for rallying further support in future. Though this evangelistic circuit was categorically different from mainstream theatrical releases, it was already a gigantic step forward from the early audiovisual projects by various Christian bodies. More significantly, the developed church network proved to be crucial to the box office success of subsequent Media Evangelism films, which relied heavily on selling group tickets through churches.

Eventually for four weeks in September 1999, the Media Evangelism

production *Sometimes, Miracles Do Happen* (天使之城, dir. Adrian Kwan, 1999) was shown for five showings per day, seven days a week in Cine-Art House, a mini art house cinema. In order to avoid being forced off the screen prematurely because of a poor box office record, Media Evangelism rented the cinema with a lump sum of money.⁹ By so doing the organisation, as the film owner, bore the risk of box office failure and put the cinema at ease by guaranteeing its income, and thus prevented the latter from terminating the screening.

Shot in video in Betacam SP format, the film was not originally intended for cinema screening. With the sudden death of its leading actor Roy Chiao, who was a well respected actor and winner of the Best Leading Actor in the Hong Kong Film Awards (1996), Media Evangelism successfully marketed the film as his final work. Its marketing campaign was massive and out of proportion for a low-budget production which was shown only in a single mini theatre. Its advertising campaign in every MTR station, which was a highly popular but expensive advertising medium, ensured a high level of public awareness. At the same time, churches were flooded with promotion materials and were invited to book entire shows for their congregations and friends. Because of the enthusiastic response from the churches, many of the shows were filled. Over the four weeks, the film grossed a total of close to half a million Hong Kong Dollars, which was an admirable figure for a single mini theatre distribution.¹⁰ In view of its success, this strategy of church chartering was used every time thereafter by Media Evangelism and was also adopted by other

⁹ This arrangement was radically different from the standard practice of film distribution in Hong Kong, which was a share of box office revenue between the cinema and the film owner-distributor according to a predetermined industry formula.

¹⁰ Figure given informally by the cinema operator.

organisations.

It did not take long for Media Evangelism to establish itself as part of the local film industry. When its next project, *The Boss Up There* (生命揸 fit 人,¹¹ dir. Henry Poon, 1999), was released in November of the same year, the organisation was able to secure a standard distribution arrangement with a cinema circuit. The film was shown in the circuit for two weeks and, according to official figures from Media Evangelism, had drawn twenty thousand people into the cinemas. Apart from its popularity within the church, it received considerable critical acclaim, including a nomination for the Best Leading Actress in the Golden Horse Film Awards in Taipei (2000) as well as the Best Supporting Actor in the Golden Bauhinia Awards operated by the Hong Kong Film Critics Society (2000).

Though it is not the only Christian organisation to produce feature films, Media Evangelism is the most productive among its peers and apparently the most widely recognised in the media market during the first few years of the twenty first century, despite the numerous controversies and serious criticisms it has been facing in recent years.¹² From table 3.1 below, it can be seen that out of the eleven films by

¹¹ This Chinese film title includes a local Hong Kong slang '揸 fit' which originates from the gangster world and means 'take charge'. Like some other contemporary Hong Kong expressions, it cannot be represented in formal written Chinese and hence the *sound* (but not the meaning) of an English word is borrowed.

¹² In the last few years, there have been considerable queries among some Hong Kong Christians concerning Media Evangelism's allegedly problematic approach to ministry, including its financial management, opportunistic style of ministry, overly commercial approach to evangelism, its arbitrary way of handling Christian media workers, its holding back of staff salaries, and the like. The most serious controversy is a challenge toward its integrity in claiming to have discovered the remains of Noah's Ark in the promotion of its documentary-styled film *The Days of Noah*, which was in cinemas during Easter 2005. These queries from Christians and related heated discussions can be seen in the online forums and readers comments in the online edition of the weekly *Christian Times* <www.christiantimes.org.hk>, particularly around March to April 2005.

Christian organisations that have been publicly released from 1999 to 2005, seven were Media Evangelism productions.

Table 3.1

**All local films produced by Christian organisations
publicly released in Hong Kong (up to May 2005)¹³**

Film Title	Year of Release	Production Company
<i>Sometimes, Miracles Do Happen</i> 天使之城	1999	Media Evangelism
<i>The Boss Up There</i> 生命揸 fit 人 ¹⁴	1999	Media Evangelism
<i>Sweet Sweet Life</i> 甜美生活	2000	Breakthrough
<i>The Ultimate Intelligence</i> 極度智能	2001	Media Evangelism
<i>Life is a Miracle</i> 生命因愛動聽	2001	Media Evangelism
<i>Windy Days, Windy Nights</i> 風的日夜	2001	Breakthrough
<i>The Saving Hands</i> 最激之手	2001	Multi Media Oasis & Freeman Production
<i>Return from the Other World</i> 賭神之神	2002	Media Evangelism & Mandarin Film
<i>The Source of Love</i> 源來是愛	2003	Windflower Production
<i>The Miracle Box</i> 天作之盒	2004	Media Evangelism
<i>The Days of Noah</i> 挪亞方舟驚世啟示	2005	Media Evangelism

While evangelistic film was becoming established as a genre in the Hong

¹³ Only cinematic works that are produced as feature films and publicly released with ticket sales are listed. There are some other productions that have been distributed through alternative means (such as showing only within churches or distributing free tickets through selected channels).

¹⁴ See note 11 above.

Kong film market, a debate arose among some concerned Christians as to what constitutes an evangelistic film. As early as 1999 when evangelistic film was still in an early stage, a Christian film critic commented that these films tend to present the impression that people would become Christians only when they were weak, and that these films focused singly on the moment of conversion to the neglect of other dimensions in life.¹⁵ The discussion became heated in 2001 when four Christian productions were released in the same year (see Table 3.1 above), and the secular production of *Forever and Ever* (地久天長, dir. Raymond To, 2001) was also on screen.¹⁶ The issue attracted even more attention when later in that year a legal dispute arose between Media Evangelism and Freeman Productions over the copyright of *The Saving Hands* (最激之手, dir. Lau Ting Kin, 2001).

At its core, the debate involves the difference between the ‘audience use’ perspective and the ‘filmmakers’ intention’ perspective. Those who adopt the ‘audience use’ perspective believe that any film can be an evangelistic film as far as it inspires reflections on matters of life, such as human nature, love, forgiveness, and the like. Hence one Christian commentator realises the possible religious use of *Forever and Ever* and considers it a ‘successful evangelistic film’. Impressed by the film’s celebration of maternal love and value of life, this commentator calls it a cruel fact that this film made by a non-Christian team serves a better evangelistic purpose than

¹⁵ Chan Yu (陳榆) ‘The Holy and the Secular: Deconstructing Gospel Film Culture’ (神聖與世俗：解構福音電影文化), *Logos-in-Text* 11 (November 1999) (Hong Kong: Logos Publishing).

¹⁶ *Forever and Ever* was adapted from the autobiographical writings of a Christian young man who acquired HIV through blood transfusion. The story focused on how he struggled with the HIV with his mother’s support and experienced the love of God. The books were award winning long-time best sellers in Hong Kong in the 1990s and had been adapted to become a very popular stage play. Raymond To is an award-winning playwright who has also written the stage play of the same story, but the film is his debut in cinema directing.

any Media Evangelism production.¹⁷ In a review of *The Saving Hands*, another Christian commentator remarks that there are only good films and bad films but no such things as evangelistic films or secular films; a so called 'secular film' may do a better job in glorifying the divine as long as Christians are able to respond to the issues posed by these films.¹⁸ Also in a review of *The Saving Hands*, still another Christian critic states that what are called evangelistic films are merely ordinary commercial genre films added with fringe elements of Christianity and target the church for its marketing. The major difference does not lie in the message or the cast; instead it depends on whether or not the producer uses the name of a Christian organisation, exploits evangelism as a means, and promotes the product directly to the church.¹⁹ This understanding of evangelistic film in essence questions the very legitimacy of the genre's existence. Critics who adopt this view are in fact rendering the label of 'evangelistic film' meaningless; they regard it as simply a marketing tactic to lure church members to buy tickets.

On the contrary, there are those who uphold the centrality of the filmmakers' creative intention and religious faith. Christian filmmaker Henry Poon, for example, emphasises that he is only concerned with two things when it comes to evangelistic films. First, how the filmmakers can be accepted in the eyes of God and the film be used by God to bless the audience; second, whether the film has represented the

¹⁷ He Gu (何故) 'Forever and Ever: a Successful Evangelistic Film' (地久天長：一套成功的福音電影), *Christian Times* 705 (4 March 2001).

¹⁸ Shui Xiang San Mu (水巷三木), 'A Defence of 'Secular Movies': What is an Evangelistic Film?' (A Defence of 'Secular Movies': 甚麼是福音電影?), *Christian Times* 743 (25 November 2001).

¹⁹ Su Zi (俗子), 'New Breed of Commercial Film within the Frame of Evangelistic Film' (福音電影框框裡的商業電影新品種), *Christian Weekly* 1942 (11 November 2001).

gospel message of salvation to sinners and depicted the latter's response.²⁰ As a director of evangelistic films, his intention in using the films as tools for spreading the gospel is obvious. Another Christian director Adrian Kwan says in an interview that he does not know what an evangelistic film should be like and has no interest in digging for an answer. What he insists is to communicate faith, hope, and love in every piece of work. He tells the interviewer that when he feels the presence of God in the production process, he would know that God is going to use the film and that to him is a gospel film.²¹ In an article, Adrian Kwan discloses his practice of requesting a specific group of fellow Christians to pray for his spiritual life during his filmmaking.²² In the view of these two directors, then, the most definitive factor of an evangelistic film is the creative intent, which must be the filmmaker's self-conscious sense of mission to communicate the Christian gospel. Equally important are the filmmaker's own religious conviction and spirituality, without which a film cannot be evangelistic no matter what the subject matter is. With these viewpoints from the filmmakers themselves as informative backdrops, I now turn to the analyses of individual films, starting with two films directed by Adrian Kwan.

²⁰ Henry Poon (亨利潘) 'I am a Christian Filmmaker' (我是一個基督教電影工作者), *Christian Times* 709 (1 April 2001).

²¹ 'Evangelistic Film Director Adrian Kwan: I Do Not Know What an Evangelistic Film is' (福音導演關信輝：我不知道甚麼是福音電影), *Christian Weekly* 1988 (29 September 2002). This interview is about his film *If U Care* (賤精先生, 2002), which is supposed to be a 'secular film' produced by a commercial company. The writer of the film, also a Christian, claims that it is an evangelistic film in disguise because it is created with Christian intentions and values. Source: Chik Ka Kei (戚家基), 'If U Care: an Evangelistic Film in Disguise' (賤精先生：隱身臥底的福音電影), *Christian Weekly* 1986 (15 September 2002).

²² Adrian Kwan (關信輝) 'An Angel becomes Mr Cheap' (天使變賤精), *Christian Times* 786 (22 September 2002).

3C. Talking about God in Tragic Moments: *Life is a Miracle*²³

3C.1. *The Film in Context*

Life is a Miracle was in the cinema from 3 May to 27 June 2001 and recorded a box office income of slightly more than five million. It was not only the top grossing film in the same period but was also widely considered a box office miracle for such a modest budget production released in an off peak season. In fact by the end of its first week, Media Evangelism already claimed openly that the film had created a miracle with the participation from churches.²⁴ In addition to cinema release, Media Evangelism also arranged for the film to be shown in a series of evangelistic gatherings in churches, during which the film show was typically accompanied by an evangelistic sermon with a call for conversion.²⁵ The production company apparently put a lot of emphasis on these gatherings and the number of conversions, as they regarded these as crucial for bringing the audience to Christ's salvation.²⁶

Christian responses to *Life is a Miracle* were nonetheless ambivalent. A member of the audience who claimed to be experienced in making evangelistic short

²³ *Life is a Miracle* (生命因愛動聽), directed and written by Adrian Kwan, 2001.

²⁴ Media Evangelism press release, 11 May 2001. It should be noted that the film only opened in five cinemas initially but was joined by eight others in the second week, as a result of the remarkable box office record of one million over the first five days. The press release uses the Chinese term 'god act' (*shenji* 神蹟) for miracle, which is seldom used outside the Christian circle, instead of the commonly used Chinese term for miracle, 'wonder act' (*qiji* 奇蹟).

²⁵ According to Media Evangelism official information, more than four hundred of these rallies had been held both in and outwith Hong Kong up to the end of 2001, with a total attendance of more than 129,000 while 3,400 conversions were claimed.

²⁶ This view was expressed by Christian filmmaker Henry Poon, who at the time was closely associated with Media Evangelism. See his article 'I am a Christian Filmmaker', *Christian Times* 709 (1 April 2001).

films saluted it as a successful attempt at sharing the gospel with a general audience because it has broken through the limits of religious jargon. He said that while the story looked simple, the expression of truth was not simplistic; it was not just warm and sentimental but had skilfully represented God's unfathomable love. In other words it maintained the integrity of the Christian gospel while successfully creating a mass appeal.²⁷ Others complained that *Life is a Miracle* was just a touching story with a vague representation of the Christian faith. As a Christian commentator observed, there was a general concern within the church about the project's commercial approach to evangelistic film. This commentator criticised the film as being simply an emotional appeal which lacked the rational dimension of the gospel and questioned its legitimacy as an evangelistic endeavour.²⁸

3C.2. *Distinctiveness: a Theophany-like Experience*

The main storyline of *Life is a Miracle* is about a lively social worker, Tracy, who realises herself to have relapsed into terminal cancer when she is only two years into her marriage and just started her new job of serving cancer patients in a hospital. Despite this ill fate her perseverance and inner strength inspire those around her. These include a young rebellious cancer patient who despises her ex-convict father and is spellbound by her own bitter sarcasm, and Tracy's own doctor who has lost his wife to cancer some years ago. Knowing that her days are numbered, she starts making plans for her husband's future by introducing girl friends to him. Yet he rejects this arrangement and reaffirms his exclusive love for her. Finally the couple is seen to be fulfilling Tracy's last dream of revisiting a lakeside beach where she

²⁷ Yuen Wai Sun, 'The Two-Fold Prospect for Gospel Film', *Christian Times* 716 (20 May 2001).

²⁸ Chan Kwong Wai, 'The Market Value of the Gospel', *Christian Times* 721 (24 June 2001).

promised to marry him.

The crux of the film, both in terms of narrative structure and expression of Christian faith, is a cathedral scene in which Tracy meets her 'angel' – an unnamed old lady who inspires her deeply. Reminiscent of a divine encounter, this scene is illustrative of what Bird calls 'film as hierophany', as it is 'a disclosure of the transcendent or sacred precisely through the material of reality'.²⁹ Opening with a low angle panning wide shot which follows Tracy into the cathedral, backed by a hymn-like music track, the scene creates a sense of the protagonist approaching holy ground. Then the sanctuary is taken from an extreme low angle as the camera slowly dollies out, with the coloured glass in focus and the altar at the foreground, placing the old lady in between the sanctuary and the pew where Tracy sits. This arrangement is suggestive of the lady's role as a mediator between the divine and the protagonist. Cinematically, the *mise-en-scene* does suggest a hierophany- or theophany-like experience of divine encounter. Structurally the scene is not only the major psychological and spiritual turning point of the protagonist but also the crux from which the theological assertions in the film develop. Most of the expressions of faith are subsequent to and consequential of this encounter.

As evidenced by her character change, Tracy is inspired and commissioned in this theophanic experience to become an angel-messenger to spread the tidings of faith, love, and hope to those around her. Before the cathedral encounter, she was

²⁹ Michael Bird, 'Film as Hierophany', in *Religion in Film*, edited by John May and Michael Bird (Knoxville, Tennessee: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 3. In his article, Bird applies into the discussion of film and religion this concept of hierophany, which is originally used by Mircea Eliade in his study of the mythic and ritualistic dimensions of religion to refer to 'the *act of manifestation* of the sacred' (original italics). See: Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harper, 1961), 11; quoted from Bird, 'Film as Hierophany', 3.

exhausted, pale, full of worries and despair. The question she poses to the old lady betrays her deep sense of frustration and bitterness toward her own misfortune.³⁰ After hearing the words from her angel, the subsequent sequence shows Tracy and her husband singing their favourite light-hearted love song on the hospital roof; other people who hear them sing are touched and respond with smiles.³¹ After that, Tracy is seen to be consciously doing things to encourage others and become an angel to those around her.³²

In addition to her attitude change, the cathedral experience also provides her with the content of her subsequent expressions of faith. Hence, in this experience she is confronted with not only the commission to be a messenger but also the substance of the message. This message which originates from the old lady's sharing and is repeatedly told throughout the film is three-fold: celebration of the love in matrimony as the best divine blessing; assurance of the hope of eternal life; and assertion of human life as divine vocation under the providence of God who is supremely good. In the following sections I shall discuss these recurring themes that run through the whole film.

³⁰ Literally, Tracy asks, 'Don't you think it is very *wunai* (無奈) to be a human being?' This Chinese expression *wunai* does not have a direct parallel in English; it refers to a deep sense of frustration and discontent toward the tragic but unchangeable circumstances that entangle human life.

³¹ The treatment of this scene bears resemblance to a scene in the Hollywood film *Shawshank Redemption* (dir. Frank Darabont, 1994), in which Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) plays Mozart's *The Wedding of Figaro* through the warden's public address system and lights up all the inmates with his vision of hope. Though the visions of hope in the two films are drastically different, they both are about one seemingly hopeless character spreading the message of hope in an apparently hopeless place.

³² Tracy's role as an angel to others is underlined in the voice-overs by the rebellious girl at both the beginning and ending of the film, in which she says she has met an angel in person and has learnt that anyone can become an angel who brings blessings to others.

3C.3 *Vision of Blessing and Hope*

One aspect of the key message which emerges in the cathedral scene is the celebration of love in matrimony as the best possible blessing from God. This notion is first conveyed through the personal experience of the old lady,³³ and then reinforced in Tracy's subsequent extended prayer sequence. When love in wedlock is the premium blessing, then faithfulness and selflessness to one's spouse is upheld as the ultimate virtue in life. Therefore the film celebrates Tracy's altruistic concern for her husband's future after her imminent death, as well as the latter's reaffirmation of love and adoration of Tracy despite her physical deterioration. Likewise, marriage and family rather than career and material gains are emphasised as the primary responsibility of a man. In fact, the whole belief in the primacy of love is most prominently expressed in the original Chinese film title, *Sheng Ming Yin Ai Dong Ting* (生命因愛動聽), which literally means 'life is enjoyable (as music) because of love'. By focusing exclusively on the one-on-one relationship in marriage, the film's conception of divine blessing and human responsibility is primarily individualistic and lacks any reference to elements outside of personal life.

Despite the film's emphasis on the divine nature of a loving relationship in matrimony, audience responses suggest that it is received as a sentimental 'tearjerker'. This is hardly surprising since in its plot *Life is a Miracle* is a terminal disease love

³³ The old lady tells how she turned from her plan to be a nun and became convinced that marriage is more compatible with God's design, since humans are created as men and women to love and uphold each other. She is grateful to God who has given her a loving and supportive husband and regards this as the greatest blessing in life. This is in fact the actress' own true story. Many among the Hong Kong audience would notice that she is giving her personal testimony here as she and her late husband have spoken about it publicly a number of times.

story, which is a perennially popular genre both locally³⁴ and elsewhere.³⁵ This perception on the part of the audience is evidenced in my sample of audience writings; regardless of religious background, some audience members tend to use the film as an emotional catharsis to release psychological tension and pay little attention to the religious dimension in the story.³⁶

While marital love has a prominent position in the narrative, the central faith claim of the film is in fact the hope of eternal life. This claim is stated in its tag line, which is used as its advertising slogan and the film's opening caption: 'The biggest fear in life is not death but hopelessness. The biggest miracle in life is to find hope from hopelessness.' While the tag line does not spell out the nature of this hope, it is explicated overtly throughout the story and underpinned by the director's personal note at the film's ending.³⁷

Within the story itself, this hope of eternal life is first brought to the audience

³⁴ The most notable example is *C'est la Vie, Mon Cheri* (新不了情) (dir. Derek Yee, 1993), which is a remake of the local classic *Love Without End* (不了情) (dir. Tao Chin, 1961). As the top grossing terminal disease romance in Hong Kong to date, it grossed more than HKD 30 million in the cinema from 11 November 1993 to 13 January 1994 and won six major awards at the 13th Hong Kong Film Awards, including Best Film, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Leading Actress, Best Supporting Actor, and Best Supporting Actress.

³⁵ Mass audience in many parts of the world would be familiar with the Hollywood production of *Love Story* (dir. Arthur Hiller, 1970).

³⁶ For example a Christian girl regards the film as being in the same category as *C'est la Vie, Mon Cheri* (Karen's web diary, 5 May 2001 [<http://www.bluewykaren.com/bluewykaren/diary.htm>] last retrieved on 21 May 2005); a young Catholic girl admits that she feels much better after crying badly during the film, which she has to watch on two separate days (Cora's web diary, 23 July 2003 [http://waicora.com/june03/diary/d/2003_07.html] last retrieved on 21 May 2005); a young man says he cries from his heart even after viewing for ten times because the director is so good at manipulating emotions (Joseph Lau's web diary, 1 August 2004 [<http://www.josephlau.net/html/diary.html>] last retrieved on 21 May 2005).

³⁷ The note reads: 'Tracy: I miss you, my friend. But I know we will see each other again ... in heaven. Adrian.'

in the cathedral scene. There, when the desolate Tracy expresses frustration over the inevitable separation in death, the old lady responds by saying 'if we have God in our hearts, there will be no separation'. This line is reinforced by her action of rekindling a candle which has just gone off, thus visually suggesting that there is another beginning to life after its end. This hope is applied to the protagonist when in the following scene her husband talks about keeping the wedding rings for the future reunion in heaven. Here a particular interpretation of life after death as reunion with the loved one is injected into the classical Christian notion. This individualistic interpretation is further underscored and reinforced by the frequent recurrence of the melody of the theme song, which ends with the line 'meeting you again in Heaven one day'. This individualistic vision of hope, however, is not necessarily understood by many. For example, a member of the audience, although touched by the old lady's recounting of her memories of her late husband, still remarks that the divine likes to make fun of people as those who love each other are often separated.³⁸ The character's (and actress') hopeful conviction in final reunion is completely missed.

3C.4. *Representation of Reality*

As in the case of many of their media projects, Media Evangelism emphasises that *Life is a Miracle* is based on a true story. It uses multiple means to remind the audience of this in order to add weight to the film's credibility as an evangelistic tool. In the film, a short appendix of a real life video of the couple (on whom the story is based) is added to the end of the film, and before the end credit is

³⁸ Joseph's web diary, 10 May 2001: <http://home.i-cable.com/josephha/icq.htm> (last retrieved on 21 May 2005). By stating that the loving relationship between Roy Chiao and Mrs Chiao is a good model, this audience member is in fact taking the lines as real testimony rather than drama.

the director's personal note which addresses Tracy as his friend.³⁹ Additionally a documentary about the couple, entitled *Life is a Miracle – Real Life Testimony Edition* has been released in VCD format simultaneously with the film. Also the husband is invited to share his testimony at the film's premier and other occasions.⁴⁰ Apart from these, a most remarkable yet subtle diegetic link to reality is the casting of its pivotal character – the unnamed old lady who inspires Tracy during their brief encounter in the cathedral. This role is played by the actress Xiao Jinzi, the widow of the well respected Christian actor Roy Chiao. The well known loving relationship of this couple underscores the credibility of her lines about her own marriage. As a Christian commentator observes, watching the part by Mrs Chiao is more like listening to a personal testimony of hers.⁴¹ Here, drama and reality are intermingled.

Despite these attempts in building multiple links to reality, *Life is a Miracle* falls short of creating a genuine connection between its faith claims and the daily reality of the audience. While the story itself is concerned with experiencing God amidst human suffering, certain fundamental directorial decisions in filming locations and cinematographic framing betray a concept of the divine that is detached from the mundane. In the first place, setting the story in a relatively peaceful corner of British Columbia in Canada creates a sense of distance from the film's primary audience in

³⁹ The director was introduced to the couple about one year before Tracy passed away. See: 'Alumnus Interview – Director Adrian Kwan of *Life is a Miracle*', *Kowloon Sam Yuk Secondary School Alumni News* (May 2001).

⁴⁰ These tactics are commonly used in most film projects of Media Evangelism, including *Return from the Other World* which is also discussed in this chapter.

⁴¹ The commentator further remarks that these interconnections with reality are important because as an evangelistic film it aims at conversions, which are decisions that must be based on the real; only the real can confront reality, he says. See: Daniel Ku (古斌), 'Hyper-textual Links in *Life is a Miracle*' (生命因愛動聽的超文本連結), *Christian Times* 717 (27 May 2001).

Hong Kong, whose daily reality in their crowded city is much more frenzied than any shots on screen. To them, the locality of the story belongs to another world which is far away from their everyday experience.⁴²

This sense of distance from a hectic reality is intensified by the visual detachment of the main narrative from the city. Whilst there are only a limited number of city shots in the whole film, the only shots of busy streets are general views used as opening and closing shots, in which none of the characters are present and no drama is taking place. Most of the human faces that appear in these shots are Caucasians whereas all of the major characters involved in the story are Chinese. The only time when the main characters and the city appear in the same frame are shots in which they are on the hospital rooftop where the cityscape is seen at a far distance. The city, with which the film's primary Hong Kong audience is familiar, has no part in the narrative.

Another significant directorial decision in terms of location is the locale of Tracy's encounter with her angel the old lady. This scene occurs inside a tranquil and elegant old cathedral which, as Tracy remarks, is a place 'so comfortable that you can forget about all unhappiness in the world'. In other words, it belongs to an unreal dimension detached from reality. A cathedral such as this one is indeed distant from the daily lives of the audience in Hong Kong, most of whom have little experience of such a place even if they are regular churchgoers. Yet, it is here that the disturbed and despondent protagonist meets her angel, regains hope, and turns around to become an angel for others. This encounter is designed to occur at a location that is not only far

⁴² In real life, the couple lived in Australia.

beyond the real life experience of the audience but also overtly described as detached from the real world.

In short, regardless of the multiple tactics to remind the audience of its connection with reality, cinematic elements such as the film language and the directorial choice of locations betray an essential detachment from the real life situation of the audience. Faith in God is only found in the peaceful church, the serene countryside, and the tranquil suburbs. The God represented in *Life is a Miracle*, albeit being verbally mentioned as the source of hope and love, is one who does not truly incarnate into the daily struggles of human lives.

3C.5. Concluding Observations

In the cinema, *Life is a Miracle* successfully touched the general audience with its sentimental terminal disease plot and created a level of commercial popularity that was unprecedented among Christian productions. My textual study, however, finds that the film exhibits a highly individualistic view of divine blessing and Christian hope. When the film upholds love in matrimony as the best gift from God and affirms the prospect of reuniting with the loved one in eternal life as the ultimate hope, it puts forth a vision that is exclusively concerned with the individual. Moreover, in its subtext the film projects a concept of God that is detached from the mundane. Despite the narrative's treatment of human suffering, God and the faith in God are subliminally represented as distant from daily human reality. It is only in extraordinary situations, whether extraordinarily serene or unbearable, that the Divine can be encountered. The deity represented in this film is one who does not fully incarnate into the ordinary human world.

Concomitantly my contextual study also finds that the overall approach of the film has encountered mixed reactions among local Christians. While some applaud its achievement in reaching the mass audience, others complain about its vagueness in communicating the Christian gospel and question its legitimacy to be considered an evangelistic work. Furthermore, I find that many among the audience view the film merely as conveying positive humanistic values or even consume it as a tear-jerking cathartic experience, without any regard for its intended religious message. It is therefore dubious whether the faith claims of the filmmakers⁴³ have been grasped and even more doubtful whether the purpose of sharing the gospel with non Christians has been achieved in the cinema.

3D. Maintaining Faith in Face of Catastrophe: *The Miracle Box*⁴⁴

3D.1. *The Film in Context*

The Miracle Box is by far the top grossing local Christian film in Hong Kong. Apart from its touching story and popular main cast,⁴⁵ there is little doubt that the key factor behind its commercial success is the social context of the project. From the very beginning when the project was announced to the public, Media Evangelism

⁴³ In this and most other instances in this thesis, the use of the plural 'filmmakers' instead of the singular 'filmmaker' is intentional. This is based on my understanding of the nature of the filmmaking industry in Hong Kong, in which very often the director does not have full control of the film and several other key people in the project may have equally important input into its content and style. These would include the producers, writers, and even some key figures in the cast. The same is also true for the Christian films.

⁴⁴ *The Miracle Box* (天作之盒), directed by Adrian Kwan, 2004.

⁴⁵ The leading actress Ada Choi is one of the top television celebrities in Hong Kong; the leading actor Tse Kwan Ho is a top stage and film actor who has won a Best Leading Actor Award in the Hong Kong Film Awards a few years earlier; many in the supporting cast are high profile figures in the local media.

claimed that it was the true story of Dr Joanna Tse, the first medical doctor who sacrificed her life during Hong Kong's battle against SARS in early summer 2003. Because of wide media coverage of her selfless voluntary duty in the SARS ward, the public had a special feeling toward her while the media intimately called her 'the daughter of Hong Kong'. As the people's memory of the battle with SARS was still fresh, the release of a film about this legendary figure within a year after her death was likely to be sensational. When *The Miracle Box* was in cinemas during the Easter season of 2004 from 8 April through 25 May, it grossed a total of more than six and a half million Hong Kong Dollars, breaking the record of all previous Christian cinematic productions. It was also the first ever Christian production that was invited for official entry in the major national film event in China, the Golden Rooster and Hundred Flowers Film Festival.

Nevertheless, the production company handled the 'true story' claim with such ambiguity that the claim itself becomes dubious. While marketing efforts stress that it is the story of Dr Tse, the opening caption of the film states that it is a fictitious story. Though the English names of the protagonists are identical with those of their real life counterparts, this is not the case with their Chinese names.⁴⁶ Also, Media Evangelism has not produced a real-life documentary about Dr Tse to accompany the film, a practice which is unusual for this organisation. In short, although Media Evangelism never retracted the claim of 'true story' from its promotion campaign, it shies away from totally identifying the film with the real Dr Joanna Tse.⁴⁷ As film

⁴⁶ The main characters' Chinese names are very similar to those of their real life counterparts: Joanna's is spelled out in the matrimony scene as Tse Yee Man (謝綺雯), whereas the real Dr Tse is Tse Yuen Man (謝婉雯), with just a single-syllable difference; her husband's surname is changed to Lau from the original Chan.

⁴⁷ The real-life documentary of Joanna is produced by another Christian organisation CBN (China),

critic Sek Kei suggests, the director is obviously not telling the true account in the film but only borrowing the characters to tell just another terminal disease love story.⁴⁸ Yet some audience writings indicate that they still perceive the film as the doctor's true story.⁴⁹ That is to say, the production company has made the audience believe that they are watching the true story of 'the daughter of Hong Kong' being dramatised while it might in fact be largely fabricated.

Moreover, even though the project is inspired by the SARS outbreak and the highly acclaimed heroic act of one young doctor, only the last ten minutes of the film's total running time of ninety six minutes deal with happenings related to that incident. Instead, the main body of the film focuses on the love story between Joanna and her husband Albert, who was also a medical doctor but died of relapsed leukaemia not long after they got married. As a church minister comments, the last part of the film is so hasty that it misses some of the essentials that have made the couple legendary, and that those who expect a biographical representation of Joanna Tse are likely to be disappointed.⁵⁰ One member of the audience even remarks that the film is disappointing because of its departure from the original intention of production; the

which claims that the project is authorised by Dr Joanna Tse's family. The memorial website www.joannatse.com (produced by a church she used to attend) also claims the same authorisation. These hint at the possibility that Media Evangelism might have faced some serious limitations or objections on fully claiming the film as the true story of Dr Tse.

⁴⁸ Sek Kei 'Evangelistic Film *The Miracle Box*', *Mingpao Daily News* (May 2004).

⁴⁹ Several audience members apparently take the film as an accurate representation of the doctor's true story when they comment that it is touching. One film fan says if the story is fictitious it would be despised by the audience but this is a different case since 'everyone knows it is a real story' (Sinan's film note, 4 May 2004 <http://movie.south.hk/2004_05_01_moviecompass_archive.html> [accessed 29 May 2005]); a university student comments that the impact of the true story is stronger than reading the newspaper coverage in the previous year (Clive's web diary, 8 April 2004 <<http://www.cliveweb.com/live/2004/april2004.htm>> [accessed 29 May 2005]).

⁵⁰ Ng Chung Man (吳宗文), 'Thoughts after the Premier of *The Miracle Box*' (《天作之盒》首映觀後之聯想), *Christian Weekly* 2069 (18 April 2004).

end product lacks coherence and the final sequence on the SARS outbreak becomes redundant in the whole narrative.⁵¹

In other words, the film has taken advantage of a significant incident and a well respected figure in the society but tells a story that is distantly related to that event and the person. Regardless of its apparent success in touching the audience with its romance story of two unfortunate, innocent people, *The Miracle Box* has not done justice to the social context that has inspired its production – the SARS outbreak in 2003. This cannot be regarded as a minor omission, since the pandemic is considered one of the most important collective experiences for Hong Kong people in recent decades.⁵² Thus when in the end credit the film pays tribute to the numerous health care professionals who risked their lives during the outbreak, it becomes a frivolous homage. In short, while it is borne out of a special context and claims to be about a special public figure, the film has disengaged itself from that context and also from the most important part of the public figure's life.

3D.2. *Distinctiveness: The Issue of Theodicy in a Social Catastrophe*

The narrative of *The Miracle Box* begins with Albert being discharged from hospital after recovering from leukaemia when Joanna is preparing for her further

⁵¹ Joseph Lau's web diary, 1 August 2004 <<http://www.josephlau.net/html/diary.html>> [accessed 21 May 2005].

⁵² During the SARS outbreak, a total of 1755 people were infected with the virus in Hong Kong alone. Among the 299 who died, eight were health care workers. From late March to June 2003, Hong Kong almost came to a standstill. Schools were closed, hospitals were quarantined, public transportations were almost empty, economic activities were at the bare minimum, international contact such as business trips and academic exchanges were all cancelled, an extended travel alert was issued by the World Health Organisation, hospitalisation figures and death tolls were updated daily in the media. Many commentators in the media described the situation as the worst time for the city in more than three decades since the pro-communist riot in the summer of 1967.

study abroad. After much struggle, they decide to get married before Joanna embarks on the study on her own. But their happiness is cut short by Albert's relapse and eventual death. Shortly afterwards, Joanna volunteers to serve in the high risk SARS ward during the epidemic's outbreak; as a result she catches the virus when performing her duty and passes away subsequently. The storyline itself is simple and straightforward. Audiences in Hong Kong would have known the ending even before entering the cinema as they are familiar with the misfortune of this 'daughter of Hong Kong' through media coverage.

In essence the story involves the misfortune of two innocent individuals within the context of a major social catastrophe of the epidemic outbreak of a previously unknown virus. As such the magnitude of human suffering depicted in this film is more intense when compared to the director's previous work *Life is a Miracle*. Yet its narrative does not seem to be concerned with the issues of human suffering and the nature of God. For the major portion of the story, the filmmakers try so hard to turn the film into a light hearted romantic story that the inherent tragic elements become ephemeral. As Sek Kei points out, this approach has weakened the dramatic impact of the latter part of the film.⁵³ Human anguish in face of misfortune is only seen in two transitory scenes – first when Albert shouts to God why his cancer relapse should happen, and then when Joanna cries ferociously in her mother's arms shortly after Albert's passing away, questioning where God is.⁵⁴ Her mother's easy

⁵³ Sek Kei 'Evangelistic Film *The Miracle Box*', *Ming Pao Daily News* (May 2004).

⁵⁴ Though the depiction of grief is limited, some audience members find their own lives echo more with this scene. One mentions that she is most impressed by this scene and Joanna's question. (Siu Lai's web diary, 13 April 2004 <<http://www.hkflash.com/diary/diary.asp?id=sl>> [accessed 29 May 2005]).

affirmation that 'God is always here' may not be appreciated by many. Film critic Sek Kei, for instance, thinks that the deity as presented in the evangelistic films is harsh on good people and unmerciful, and wonders why these films are always about terminal diseases and misfortunes.⁵⁵

Following a pattern similar to that of the previous film, *The Miracle Box* affirms the ultimate *summum bonum* of God through an analogy and admits the limitation of human understanding of the mystery of suffering. While *Life is a Miracle* compares the divine to a painter, in this film God is analogised as a jigsaw puzzle player who is putting the pieces together. In his final days, Albert reaffirms his faith that the completed puzzle would definitely be beautiful; storm and darkness in individual pieces do not tarnish the ultimate perfection of the end product. This affirmation is nonetheless undercut by the flatness of the film's characterisation. Joanna and Albert are so faithful to the Divine and so ready to accept misfortune that they look unreal as human beings. Anguish is light, sorrow is brief, and going forth in one's mission is straightforward. Joanna's eventual voluntary move to serve in the high-risk SARS ward is presented as a passing appendix. What the audience sees is a courageous young doctor who joins what is known as the 'dirty team' without showing much struggle or fear.⁵⁶ This representation looks even more unreal and weightless when it is contrasted with real-life struggles, worries, and fears expressed in a series of interviews of doctors and patients who have personally gone through

⁵⁵ Sek Kei 'Evangelistic Film *The Miracle Box*', *Mingpao Daily News* (May 2004).

⁵⁶ In fact the voluntary nature of Joanna's service in the quarantine ward is never mentioned directly in the film. It is only suggested through a voice over segment of fabricated news report which mentions that some medical professionals volunteer themselves to enter the SARS ward while Joanna is seen to be working there. The film is simply drawing on the audience's own memory about Joanna.

SARS.⁵⁷

In this manner, the film has in fact shied away from the question of human suffering, which is the most important issue within that specific context of the SARS outbreak. Even when it slightly touches on the issue, the film confines its scope to suffering of the individuals and fails to handle the problem on a collective or public level. As such, it betrays an inability to wrestle with the problem of theodicy in the context of a social catastrophe.

3D.3. *Vision of Hope*

Avoiding the issue of theodicy in a major catastrophe, director Adrian Kwan has delivered a sentimental story with a sad ending in a humorous and uplifting way through his brilliant romantic small touches and comic relief. Joanna and Albert are depicted as courageous, hopeful, and good humoured despite their misfortune. As an evangelistic film, the romantic storyline is nevertheless the packaging through which the faith claims are put forth. In *The Miracle Box*, they are embodied mainly in three recurring motifs: the tiny paper box, the rainbow, and the ring.

As the key motif in the film, the tiny paper box serves to affirm the necessity to trust in God to solve one's personal problem. In the story Albert is always giving out tiny paper boxes as a means to encourage others, and tell those who receive his boxes, 'put your worries and difficulties in the box and let God take care of it'. As it corresponds with the film's title and appears repeatedly throughout, this motif is most

⁵⁷ A collection of interviews of SARS insiders, with their real-life struggles as mortals in the face of life and death, can be seen in: Zoe Lam (林沙), *It All Starts with 8A* (一切從 8A 開始), ed. Yeung Pik-yiu (楊碧瑤) and Liu Yingkei (廖迎祺) (Hong Kong: Breakthrough, 2005).

noticeable to the audience. A church minister expresses high regard for this symbolism as a representation of prayer in a concrete form.⁵⁸ Yet, others who interpret it from humanistic viewpoints tend to strip the symbol of any religious associations and focus solely on its psychological use – for example, as a means for disposing of one's unhappiness in life in order to look for a solution,⁵⁹ or as a means to release tension so that there is no need to let anyone else take care of it.⁶⁰ These writings suggest that religious interpretation of the box as representing faith toward an omnipotent God is only discernible by believers. For non believers, they either do not grasp the symbolism or reject the idea of trusting a deity as a valid solution to issues in life.

The second motif, the rainbow, serves to affirm the belief in a specific form of life after death as well as to celebrate the central importance of matrimony. First of all, the film describes the rainbow as a bridge between this life and that in heaven. When Albert talks about his own imminent death, he euphemistically talks about going to the other end of the rainbow to wait for Joanna. This projects a romantic view of the end of human life, which culminates in the final scene of the couple's reunion in the next life. In that scene Joanna and Albert happily reunite beside a tree on a green hilltop, with Albert still holding the broken umbrella which he has used during their first date.⁶¹ At the same time the rainbow also serves to uphold the

⁵⁸ Ng Chung Man, 'Thoughts after the Premier of *The Miracle Box*'.

⁵⁹ Bonbon's web diary, 23 November 2004 <<http://www.laingar.com/diary2004/200411.html>> [accessed 29 May 2005].

⁶⁰ Man Man's web diary, 14 August 2004 <<http://www.manman.com.hk/aug04.htm>> [accessed on 29 May 2005].

⁶¹ In its visual conception, this scene is reminiscent of the final scene of the Hollywood romance *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* (dir. Henry King, 1955), in which Han Suyin (Jennifer Jones) reunites with Mark Elliot (William Holden) beside a tree on a hill top in Hong Kong. In that film, however,

centrality of the promise in matrimony, mainly through its theme song *A Promise under the Rainbow*. This contemporary Chinese hymn borrows the imagery of the rainbow which signifies God's covenant with Noah (Genesis 9) to portray human hope for unfailing divine providence. Its use in Joanna's and Albert's wedding further applies the song to the couple on a personal level.⁶² By so doing, the film is intermingling divine covenant and human promise, and elevates the sanctity of marriage to a level comparable to a divine covenant.

The sanctity of marital commitment is further highlighted in the third major motif of the film, the ring. It is mentioned several times throughout the narrative that a ring should not be casually offered or accepted because it entails solemn commitment. This emphasis on marriage is underpinned by the film's detailed representation of the vow in Joanna's and Albert's wedding ceremony.⁶³ Toward the latter part of the story it is further emphasised through the audio recap of the vow immediately before Albert's death scene. This recap and the subsequent replay of the theme song form a cinematically powerful sequence which stresses the couple's conviction of the next life. The audiovisual treatment suggests that Joanna and Albert are not separated by his death as their vow continues to be valid beyond that point. In

the whole scene is designed as Han's fantasy in her desperate memory of her deceased fiancé, while in *The Miracle Box* it can only be understood as the filmmaker's depiction of the couple's reunion in heaven. The visual treatment is similar but the tone is exactly the opposite in the two films: in *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* it communicates a sorrow of loss; in *The Miracle Box* it is a vision of reunion.

⁶² In fact the song was also sung at the wedding of Joanna and Albert in real life, and the audience in Hong Kong would know this well because of wide media reportage. By adopting the song as its theme song, the film is actually intermingling fiction and reality, and is again subtly claiming itself to be a faithful representation of Joanna's story.

⁶³ Ada Choi, the actress who plays the part of Joanna, says in an interview that she herself was moved when shooting the wedding scene. She said she was struck by the solemnity of marriage when she had to read the vow in such detail. Source: 'Interview of Ada Choi', in *The Sun* (Hong Kong), Entertainment Page, 12 March 2004.

the final hilltop reunion scene, the beliefs in life after death and sanctity of marriage are merged and represented in a concrete form.

While the major faith claims of the film are embodied in its three recurring motifs, the one underlying common feature among them is the exclusive concern for personal issues. The tiny paper box points to the trust in God to solve personal problems, the rainbow signifies a personal hope for eternal reunion with the loved one and also affirms the primacy of the personal promise in marriage, while the ring further underlines the sanctity of matrimony between two individuals. In other words, the theological orientation of this film is characterised by an individualistic vision, with its sole focus on issues that concern the individual.

3D.4. *Concluding Observations*

As a film from the same director and production company, *The Miracle Box* does share a number of similarities with *Life is a Miracle* in its theological outlook, in addition to their dramatic similarities of being terminal disease love stories. Brought forth through its three main recurring motifs of the tiny paper box, the rainbow, and the ring, the faith claims of the film are solely concerned with personal issues. They include the trust in the Divine to solve personal problems, the foremost sanctity of matrimony between persons, as well as the belief in a specific form of everlasting life in which beloved individuals are reunited.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ The director's preoccupation with life after death and his fascination with stories of terminal disease might be related to his personal experience with his mother. In an interview by a Christian monthly, Adrian Kwan discloses that when his own mother fell prey to cancer in 1995, she became a Christian after watching an evangelistic video before she finally passed away. This, he said, has inspired his intention to make quality evangelistic films to bring blessings to others. See: 'Adrian Kwan: the Director of *The Miracle Box*' (《天作之盒》導演一關信輝), in *Herald Monthly* (Hong Kong edition, March 2004).

While the narrative is lucid, the film is problematic when scrutinised against its context of production. As the top grossing local film produced by a Christian group, there is little doubt that *The Miracle Box* has gained its commercial popularity by making use of the significant social incident of the SARS outbreak and the public memory of ‘the daughter of Hong Kong’. In this sense the film has not done justice to any of them; it merely takes advantage of the local audience’s psychological proximity to both to tell a story of its own. By choosing to tell a largely fabricated love story, the film fails to engage itself with one of the most significant collective memories of its primary audience in Hong Kong. Moreover, by marginalising the SARS outbreak into a passing appendix in the narrative, the film shies away from grappling with the problem of God in the face of a major social catastrophe. This betrays a theological limitation of the filmmakers as being unable to address serious issues that are beyond the individual.

3E. Encounter between Christianity and Traditional Chinese Culture:

The Source of Love⁶⁵

3E.1. *The Film in Context*

Unlike *Life is a Miracle* and *The Miracle Box*, which had both enjoyed considerable popularity during their cinema release, *The Source of Love* was relatively unnoticed among the general public. The film went through a number of special showings in a few cinemas and public venues in the summer of 2003 and was formally released on 30 October in a handful of cinemas. Under the coordination of

⁶⁵ *The Source of Love* (源來是愛), directed and co-written by Stephen Shin, 2003.

the Hong Kong Church Renewal Movement there was some attention from within the church but public response was far from enthusiastic.⁶⁶ The lack of available official business figures from the Motion Picture Industry Association (MPIA) suggested that box office revenue was minimal. Audience writings on this film were scarce. As a commentator observed, most people, including the religious, were not aware of the film when it was released.⁶⁷

Part of the church's interest in this film comes from the personal testimony of the director Stephen Shin, who claims to have experienced a renewal of faith in the process of doing the project. As a well known filmmaker in Hong Kong throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, he was not known in the field to be a practising Christian. In an interview for the *Christian Times*,⁶⁸ he confesses that although he has grown up in a Christian family and attends church services regularly, he has in fact been indifferent in faith ever since his university days. He regards the invitation to make this film as a homecoming call from God and claims to have experienced spiritual renewal through involvement in the project. He stresses that he is not the original creator of the story but is called by God to do the job. While he does not know whether God would use the film to save other people, he feels strongly that he himself and the team have already been saved through doing the project.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ As the film owner Windflower Production was not based in Hong Kong, much of the arrangements for these showings were taken up by the Hong Kong Church Renewal Movement, a non-denominational parachurch organisation.

⁶⁷ Cantorates in Cinespot <<http://www.cinespot.com/hkmreviews/csourceoflove.html>> [accessed 15 June 2005].

⁶⁸ 'Work Began Only after the Film was Completed – Stephen Shin' (戲拍完了，工作才開始– 洗杞然), *Christian Times* 823 (8 June 2003).

⁶⁹ Stephen Shin has worked as a television director-producer in Hong Kong since the mid 1970s and has been a well known filmmaker since the 1980s. In the mid 1990s he became inactive in the field and shifted his career to doing business in China. His Christian faith or identity is hardly

As Sek Kei points out, *The Source of Love* as a family story is a rare breed among Hong Kong films; it is also uncommon among evangelistic films as it does not focus on terminal disease.⁷⁰ The main storyline focuses on a family living on a small island. At the centre is a stiff authoritarian father who is a retiring school teacher and a lover of traditional culture, whose relationship with his Christian son and rebellious daughter is tense. Eventually the family and the neighbourhood resolve a series of crises due to the perseverance of the son.

Behind this family story of *The Source of Love* is an ambitious attempt to resolve the interrelationship between traditional Chinese culture and Christianity, and the focus is the contrasting views of veneration to ancestors. Though this dispute is presented mildly in the film, in historical reality it is the storm centre of the conflict between loyalty to Christianity as an imported religion versus loyalty to the traditional value of familial piety. In fact, the issue of ancestral veneration has long been a centre of attention for missionaries to the Chinese as well as among generations of Chinese Christians until today. The question at the core is whether or not Chinese ancestral rites involve idol worship, and thereby whether Chinese Christians should participate in these rituals.⁷¹ The issue first emerged in the early eighteenth century as the Rites Controversy within the Roman Catholic Church, which ended up forbidding Chinese converts from involving in ancestral rites.⁷² It then reappeared in the latter part of the

discernible in his previous works.

⁷⁰ Sek Kei's film review, *Mingpao Daily News* (17 June 2003).

⁷¹ For a recent and comprehensive overview of the nature of the issue, see: Lo Lung Kwong, 'The Nature of Ancestral Worship among Chinese Christians', *Studies in World Christianity* 9.1 (2003) 30-42.

⁷² The Rites Controversy was a prolonged debate between the Jesuit and Dominican missionaries over

nineteenth century when Protestant missionary activities in China flourished, and the mainstream position of the missionaries and Chinese Christians alike was to regard ancestral veneration as idolatry.⁷³ Toward the end of the twentieth century the issue was revisited by a new generation of Chinese scholars who examined the problem from Biblical,⁷⁴ historical,⁷⁵ and pastoral⁷⁶ perspectives. They tend to adopt more tolerant positions which recognise the central importance of ancestral veneration in the familial and cultural identities of the Chinese person.⁷⁷

3E.2. *Distinctiveness: Relating Christianity to Chinese Tradition*

By means of its characterisation, *The Source of Love* takes up the challenge

the nature of Chinese ancestral rites. The Jesuits claimed that Chinese ancestral rites were social ethical in nature and involved no idolatry in the Biblical sense but the Dominicans believed otherwise. The resolution by Pope Clement XI in 1715 adopted the Dominican's stance and shunned all Chinese Catholics from participating in rituals of ancestor veneration. To the Chinese Emperor Kangxi, who was interested in Christianity and sympathetic to the missionaries, the Pope's edict was an intervention into Chinese cultural tradition. As a response the emperor issued a decree which banned Christianity and expelled Catholic missionaries from the country. For a detailed account, see: Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of Christian Mission in China* (London: SPCK, 1929), 105-155.

⁷³ For later discussions on later development of the issue, see: George Minamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy: From Its Beginning to Modern Times* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985); David E. Mungello, *The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning*, Monumenta serica monograph series, 33 (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1994).

⁷⁴ Lo Lung Kwong, 'Identity Crisis Reflected in Romans 14:1 – 15:13 and the Implications for the Chinese Christians' Controversy on Ancestral Worship', *Ching Feng: A Journal on Christianity and Chinese Religion and Culture*, New Series 3.1-2 (2003) 23-59; K.K. Yeo, *Ancestor Worship: Rhetorical and Cross-Cultural Hermeneutical Response* (Hong Kong: Chinese Christian Literature Council, 1996).

⁷⁵ Ying Fuk-tsang 'Christianity and Chinese Ancestor Worship: a Historical Survey', in *Chinese Ancestor Worship* edited by Ying Fuk-tsang (Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary, 1997).

⁷⁶ Leung Ka-lun, 'Christianity and Chinese Ancestor Worship: a Response from a Pastoral Perspective', in *Chinese Ancestor Worship*, edited by Ying Fuk-tsang (Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary, 1997).

⁷⁷ Smith has identified four types of Christian responses toward Chinese ancestral practice: the displacement model, the substitution model, the fulfilment model, and the accommodation model. The overall tendencies of these contemporary Chinese Christian scholars lean toward the accommodation model. See: Henry N. Smith, 'A Typology of Christian Responses to Chinese Ancestor Worship', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26. 4 (1989) 628-647.

to offer a resolution to the perennial conflict between Christianity and traditional Chinese culture. In the drama this issue is embodied in the intergenerational tension between the traditional father Ming and his young Christian son, Kit, and the focus is their different attitude toward veneration of ancestors. Through the mouth of Kit the film repeatedly emphasises that the ancestors are not gods, and that they deserve respect but not worship. This implicitly equates the ancestral rites with idol worship and disregards their social and cultural meanings.⁷⁸ This standpoint resembles the 'displacement model'⁷⁹ held by many Chinese Protestants, which is inherited from the missionaries of the nineteenth century and is also the official Vatican position three centuries earlier.⁸⁰

The film's adoption of a 'displacement model' is most explicitly expressed in the scene which shows the mother dismantling ancestral tablets from the family's living room when she decides to give up offering incense to the ancestors. In reality this is a move which can only be taken by a family which has confirmed its decision to be Christian and is usually demanded by the church; in the eyes of outsiders such an action is culturally scandalous. Putting this event at that specific point in the story is awkward and religiously anachronistic, since the wife is only showing initial interest in the Christian faith while her husband, who is the heir of the family's

⁷⁸ In the traditional Chinese society in which filial piety is of central importance, a person's identity in the family is manifested through the person's position in the ancestral rites. Anyone who does not participate in the rites is essentially cut off from the extended family and thus loses identity. Therefore, forbidding Christians from participating in the rites entails serious problems for the converts; the latter are considered to be abandoning their own Chinese cultural identity, betraying their familial heritage and shifting their loyalties to a foreign religion.

⁷⁹ Henry N. Smith, 'A Typology of Christian Responses to Chinese Ancestor Worship', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26.4 (1989) 628-647.

⁸⁰ The Vatican position of the 18th century was reversed in 1939 through a decree by Pope Pius XII, which authorised Chinese Catholics to participate in ancestral rites.

ancestors, is still sceptical. In such a circumstance, the dismantling of ancestral tablets would hardly occur.

These arrangements in the storyline suggest that in the treatment of the sensitive issue of ancestral veneration, the filmmakers are not fully aware of the complexity of the issue and have not given sufficient consideration to the perspective of Chinese tradition. Despite being the central character, the traditional father's viewpoint is not represented whereas the audience is only presented with a particular position from the Christian side. It is therefore questionable whether the filmmakers' intent to appeal to the Chinese mind can be achieved. To the contrary, the traditional Chinese audience might even feel alienated because the film imposes a certain missionary standpoint into the narrative and does not do justice to Chinese cultural belief.

Despite the perceived incompatibility of ancestral rites and Christian faith, and the stance that the 'worship' of ancestors should be displaced by the worship of the Christian God, the film is eager to suggest that Christianity and Chinese culture are not mutually exclusive. Christianity is presented as complementary and not a threatening replacement of Chinese culture. In terms of evangelism among the Chinese, this undertaking is important because throughout modern missionary history since the early nineteenth century, Christianity has been rejected by many Chinese people as a threatening import from the western powers and even an instrument of imperialism.

In this regard the film puts forth a peculiar form of etymological argument

which claims to uncover ‘God’s revelation in Chinese culture’. Its approach is to deconstruct the roots of certain Chinese characters and identify in them certain elements that are broadly related to Christian doctrine. For instance, it claims that the character for ‘righteousness’ (*yi* 義) contains the notion of substitute atonement, because it is composed of the character for ‘lamb’ (*yang* 羊) placed on top of the character for ‘me’ (*wo* 我), thus suggesting a notion of ‘the lamb (Christ) doing something for me’. Another example presented in the story is the character for ‘eternal’ (*yong* 永). Interpretations such as these are in fact imaginative eisegesis of Chinese etymology which reads a particular Christian meaning into certain characters.⁸¹ They can hardly be taken seriously by the traditional Chinese mind. Rather than building a closer relationship between Christianity and Chinese culture, this approach might even adversely reinforce the perception of the foreignness of Christianity as it reads alien meanings into the language. This idiosyncratic approach is hardly convincing as an attempt to connect Christianity to Chinese culture.

3E.3. *Representation of Reality and Vision of Hope*

Besides its attempts to relate Christianity to traditional Chinese culture, *The Source of Love* also tries to engage with the modern day reality of its audience by touching on a number of issues that are confronting the society and many families in Hong Kong. These include the problems of intergenerational conflict, teenage gangs, unwed mothers, the burden of care of the elderly, and the frustrations with educational

⁸¹ Though they are not popular, similar arguments are not unheard of. For example, in *God’s Promise to the Chinese* (Read Books Publisher, 1997), Ethel Nelson *et al.* claim that unusual knowledge of the Christian story is ingrained in the Chinese language; they contend that their analysis of ancient ‘oracle bone’ characters confirms what they call a ‘hieroglyphic interpretation’ of Chinese characters.

reform. Yet many of these issues are merely used in the film as stepping stones for the filmmakers to offer their supposedly Christian solutions. For example, the intergenerational conflict is automatically resolved when the parents are converted; the personal problem of the teenage gangster is solved also by his becoming a Christian; the unwed mother is reconciled with the family as a result of the effort of her Christian brother and friend. Apparently the film is eager to put forth the message of personal conversion to Christ and has no serious intention of addressing those issues per se. This suggests that from the filmmakers' point of view, accepting the Christian faith is the final answer to all the problems, regardless of any other possible dimensions that the issues may involve. All problems are thus reduced to problems of faith. Not surprisingly, while film critic Sek Kei commends that it is unusual for these issues to appear in evangelistic films, he also critiques that the film's achievement is undermined by its Christian arrogance and excessive sentimentalism.⁸²

On the subtext level the film betrays an orientation which is likely to alienate the urban audience. A subtle contrast between simple life on the island and hectic life in the city is visually presented right from the opening montage. Throughout the drama, almost all of the urban sequences are portrayals of negative experience. It is in the city that the daughter is deserted by her unfaithful boyfriend and later attempts suicide, that the son's young friend is beaten by his fellow gangsters, that grandfather gets lost, and finally it is in the city that the son is killed in a car accident. On a subliminal level the city is represented unfavourably as a dangerous place. The only positive sequence in the city is a nostalgic trip to a pre-urbanised neighbourhood

⁸² Sek Kei's film review, *Mingpao Daily News* 17 June 2003.

during which the younger generation learns about their father's life as a child.⁸³ In this manner, the film betrays a basic orientation that is anti-urban and nostalgic of a pre-urbanised way of life, which is remote from the daily experience of the majority of the Hong Kong audience.

Furthermore, the essence of the Christian faith, which is posed as an easy solution to personal problems, is represented solely as the hope of life after death. The only motivation for the characters' conversion to Christianity is the expectation of a reunion with loved ones in heaven. This hope is most explicitly spelled out by Kit's mother after his untimely death, when she expresses her intent to go to church for the purpose of seeing her son again in the future. Also, while the ageing couple lament over their decaying health, they mention repeatedly the wish to continue their peaceful life together in the future, which implicitly points to the longing for life beyond the present one. Hence the Christian solution that the film offers is fundamentally other-worldly in nature – as soon as the issues in reality are briefly touched upon, the audience's attention is led to a hope that is not of this world.

3E.4. *Concluding Observations*

As an evangelistic film targeted at the traditional Chinese mindset, *The Source of Love* boldly endeavours to address the core issue that the Chinese people have always queried about Christianity for generations, namely the foreignness of the religion. Ambitiously it takes up the sensitive issue of ancestral veneration which has undergone heated debates over three centuries. Nonetheless, the film betrays a lack of

⁸³ In his interview in *Christian Times* 823, director Stephen Shin mentions that he himself is especially touched by this nostalgic scene because what he depicts as Ming's childhood life is reminiscent of his own childhood.

awareness to the complexity of the issue by merely offering a simplistic solution. Although presented mildly, the film uncritically adopts the mainstream position of the Protestant missionaries from the late nineteenth century and equates Chinese ancestral rites to idol worshipping. That the sociocultural importance of ancestral rites in Chinese tradition is overlooked suggests the filmmakers' lack of sensitivity toward the traditional Chinese point of view. At the same time the film's endorsement of a form of imaginative eisegesis which reads alien meanings into certain ancient Chinese characters is not only unconvincing but can even reinforce the deeply held Chinese perception of the foreignness of Christianity.

While the film also touches on a number of contemporary issues that are pertinent to many Hong Kong families, its effort in this direction is only half-hearted. Those issues are only used as stepping stones to put forth eternal life as the Christian answer to every problem. Also, the film's treatment of contemporary social reality is undermined by its mistrust toward the city and nostalgic preference for a pre-urban way of life.

Therefore, as a piece of expression of Christian faith in public, *The Source of Love* is inadequate at both ends. At one end, its attempt to engage with the traditional Chinese mindset is undercut by the lack of cultural-religious sensitivity. At the other end, the daily problems which are confronting many Hong Kong families are not treated with sufficient sincerity. The real concern of the film is the other-worldly hope of eternal life, which is put forth as the ultimate solution to every issue that it touches upon.

3F. The Battle for One Man's Soul: *Return from the Other World*⁸⁴

3F.1. *The Film in Context*

Return from the Other World is the story of a legendary gambler with a Faustian touch. Its Chinese title, *Du Shen Zhi Shen* (賭神之神, literally means 'the god of the god of gamblers') is reminiscent of the *God of Gamblers* series that has pioneered a widely popular genre in Hong Kong cinema from the late 1980s to early 1990s.⁸⁵ Though the use of this title suggested the filmmakers' intention to take advantage of the popularity of the genre, it came a whole decade later than the trend and the majority of Hong Kong audience was no longer keen on gambling films. Also, despite the marketing efforts of Media Evangelism to connect the film to the general concern in the society over pathological gambling, it did not result in any greater attention from either Christians or the general public. *Return from the Other World* was shown in twenty cinemas for a month from 25 April 2002 and grossed about one million Hong Kong Dollars in the box office.⁸⁶ In business terms this is a relatively low figure among other cinematic releases by Media Evangelism, especially when compared to the commercial success of *Life is a Miracle* in the previous year.⁸⁷ The film's lack of popularity is also indicated by the scarcity of both critical reviews and audience responses.

⁸⁴ *Return from the Other World* (賭神之神), directed by Henry Poon, 2002.

⁸⁵ Films in the series include: *God of Gamblers* (1989), *God of Gamblers II* (1991), *God of Gamblers III: Back to Shanghai* (1991), and *God of Gamblers Returns* (1994), all produced and directed by Wong Jing. Together with several other spin-offs, they made the gambling film an important genre in Hong Kong cinema in the earlier part of the 1990s.

⁸⁶ Approximate figure released by Media Evangelism. No official figure from MPIA is available at the time of writing.

⁸⁷ *Life is a Miracle* was screened in fewer cinemas but grossed five million, which is five times the box office income of *Return from the Other World*. See discussion in previous section 3C.

Based on the personal testimony of a gambler's conversion, the film attempts to portray God's miraculous deliverance of humans from the entanglement of evil forces. The story unfolds by telling how professional gambler Shiu becomes the 'Asia Pacific King of Gambling', wins a hundred million dollars at the pinnacle of his gambling career but soon loses everything and becomes bankrupt. Behind his phenomenal success is a secret deal he has made with a mysterious casino tycoon, Gao, who is clearly portrayed as the devil personified. In this way Shiu is depicted as the East Asian version of Faust who trades his soul for material gains. Eventually Shiu loses Gao's favour when he insists on terminating their deal after winning the championship and making a hundred million. Shiu's experience is presented overtly in the film as a spiritual warfare between the Christian God and the devil.

3F.2. *Distinctiveness: Portraying the Battle between Good and Evil*

In contrast to the 'growing ambivalences'⁸⁸ in representations of evil despite an increasing 'preoccupation with evil'⁸⁹ in western cinema, the depiction of evil in *Return from the Other World* is direct and explicit. Specifically, the overall experience of Shiu is presented as a spiritual struggle between good and evil within an overtly Christian framework. Filmic cues are used throughout the narrative to remind the audience of the demonic and non-material nature of Gao. For example, his appearances in several scenes are accompanied by computer generated images (GCI) of a metallic beast. His non-material existence is suggested when he appears and vanishes alternately in the point-of-view shots of Shiu in the casino. Most stunningly,

⁸⁸ Reinhold Zwick, 'The Problem of Evil in Contemporary Film', in *New Images of Religious Film*, edited by John May, translated by Stephen Uppendahl (Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 76.

⁸⁹ Zwick, *ibid.*, 72.

in the scene right after the two finish a negotiation at the roadside, Shiu suddenly finds himself alone in the middle of nowhere. In addition to these visual suggestions of Gao's nature, the spiritual confrontation is most explicitly represented in two sequences.

The climactic moment of this spiritual warfare is the sequence of Shiu's attempted suicide, which is not only the film's dramatic turning point but also the foundational event on which the whole story is built. From Shiu's perspective it is the moment of God's redemptive intervention in his life, without which his conversion would not have taken place and the whole story would not have occurred. Through parallel editing, the sequence brings together simultaneous events from three locales and creates the tension of God and the devil battling over the soul of a man. In the sequence Gao is portrayed as spiritually manipulating Shiu to jump from his high rise apartment while Shiu's wife and her Christian friends pray for God's intervention. Filmic tension is intensified with extreme close-ups on Gao's hand breaking a boiled egg, scored with a heavy-beat music track. In an subsequent scene, Shiu is visually shown to have jumped from his balcony but is lifted up in a crucifix posture before reaching the ground. With overt Christian imagery, the film suggests the victory of God in this round of the battle.

Another explicit sequence of spiritual conflict is the final confrontation between Shiu and Gao, in which Shiu tries to save a younger friend from Gao's manipulation. This friend is presented in the film as Shiu's shadow who admires the latter's magic touch on the gambling table and later follows his footsteps to make a deal with the devil. In the confrontation, Shiu directly exposes Gao's satanic identity

and invokes Jesus for deliverance. Visually Shiu and his friend are shown as being sucked into a swirling tunnel but are held back when they call out together ‘Jesus save us!’ The sequence attempts to present in CGI the subjective spiritual experience of the characters as they themselves become the battlefield between God and the devil. The next and final scene of the whole film, which shows the two distributing gospel tracts in the street, suggests that God has won the spiritual battle and both characters are converted.

When viewed from within the cultural-religious context of Hong Kong, these cinematic portrayals of spiritual conflict from an overtly Christian perspective can be problematic. Christianity, being the faith of a tiny minority in Hong Kong, has never been part of the cultural tradition of the people.⁹⁰ Though a considerable percentage of the population have come into contact with Christianity in one way or another, mostly through attending schools operated by various denominations,⁹¹ Christian beliefs and motifs are nonetheless foreign to the majority of the general public. In the media consumption experience of the people, direct and serious invocation of the Christian God in mainstream film is extremely foreign. Hence, the final sequence of spiritual confrontation in *Return from the Other World* is awkward to the non-Christian audience, as evidenced in comments from film critics.⁹²

⁹⁰ The most recent *Hong Kong Protestant Church Census 2004* reveals that less than 3% of the population in the territory are regular Protestant churchgoers. Likewise, the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong also claims a membership of about 200,000, which is close to 3% of the population.

⁹¹ Due to the policy of the former British colonial government, almost half of the government-subsidised primary and secondary schools are operated by Christian denominations.

⁹² For example, film critic Sek Kei finds the change of Shiu’s friend sudden and unconvincing (‘Sek Kei’s film review’, *Mingpao Daily News*, 3 May 2002); the review in Cinespot says that the latter part of the film becomes unbearable as it tries to ‘hardsell’ Jesus (<http://www.cinespot.com/hkmreviews/crftow.html>; last retrieved on 24 August, 2005).

While this film is essentially the dramatisation of one person's experience, the filmmakers have not demonstrated adequate critical discernment when translating this person's subjective interpretation of his own story into a narrative form that is comprehensible to the public. The protagonist's own understanding of his miraculous redemption from suicide is retold faithfully in the film despite its awkwardness to the viewer. The film's depiction of the supernatural from a Christian perspective is unrefined and explicit, and lacks sensitivity to the audience's cultural-religious context. The result is a narrative that is hardly understandable to the general Hong Kong audience.

3F.3. *Representation of Reality:*

The Film Form and the Spiritual Dimension

The most important aspect of the film's representation of reality is its portrayal of the spiritual dimension discussed above. These CGI-enhanced sequences aim at presenting the power of God in delivering humans from evil. When the sequences are examined alongside local cinematic conventions, however, it is dubious whether this message of God's almightiness can be taken seriously by the average Hong Kong audience.

In the convention of Hong Kong cinema, portrayal of the supernatural usually appears in ghost films and is rarely considered a representation of reality. While these stories are enjoyed by the Hong Kong audience, they are seldom regarded as corresponding to real life. This stands in stark contrast to some members of the West African audience who view their horror video-films as actual accounts of the

reality of evil.⁹³ In addition, the visual approach in the spiritual conflict scenes, in particular their unrealistic style, is reminiscent of the classical Chinese *wuxia* (swordplay) films in which the characters ‘fly’ around during their swordfights.⁹⁴ Whereas these fantastic scenes are taken as an integral part of the *wuxia* genre, they are viewed as legendary and have no ground in the actual world. While the filmmakers of *Return from the Other World* intend the spiritual confrontation sequences to be perceived as portrayals of what really happens in the spiritual realm, it is possible that the general Hong Kong audiences consume them as merely imaginary rather than a credible depiction of another dimension of reality. A suspension of disbelief could be at work, as when viewing the fantastic scenes in ghost films or *wuxia* films.

Apart from the fantastic depiction of the spiritual, the film’s overall style is realistic in all other sequences. Subplots such as Shiu’s addiction to gambling, the consequent family crisis, the love-hate relationship with his parents, his relationship with his uncle as well as his younger friend are treated with realism. The two diverging styles are not seen to be organically integrated. This inconsistency has led critic Sek Kei to call the film ‘magical realism’, since it puts ‘magical’ or ‘fantastic’ portrayal of the devil and the realistic depiction of daily lives side by side.⁹⁵ In other

⁹³ Jolyon Mitchell, “From Morality Tales to Horror Movies: Toward an Understanding of the Popularity of West African Video Film,” in *Belief in Media: Cultural Perspectives on Media and Christianity*, edited by Peter Horsfeld, Mary Hess, and Adano Medran (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

⁹⁴ The *wuxia* film has a long history in Chinese (including Hong Kong) cinema since the 1920s and is the cinematic version of the *wuxia* novels, a popular Chinese literary genre at least since the nineteenth century. In recent years, *wuxia* films have been popularised among non-Chinese audiences through the international distribution of such films as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (dir. Ang Lee, 2000), *Hero* (dir. Zhang Yimou, 2002), and *House of Flying Daggers* (dir. Zhang Yimou, 2004). For a comprehensive overview of the genre among the growing body of published studies, see: David Bordwell, ‘Hong Kong Martial Arts Cinema’, in *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon: A Portrait of the Ang Lee Film*, by Ang Lee *et al.* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 14-22.

⁹⁵ ‘Sek Kei’s film review’, *Mingpao Daily News*, 3 May 2002.

words, in addition to the intrinsic incompatibility between the form and the intended message of the spiritual sequences, there is also the incompatibility between the depiction of mundane reality and the spiritual dimension. These incompatibilities are likely to undermine the filmmakers' intended message.

3F.4. *Visions of Virtue and Christian Hope*

Return from the Other World belongs to a different genre from the other three Christian films examined in this chapter. Its title and at least the first half of its narrative resemble the Hong Kong gambling genre and not a romance or family story. In terms of the values they celebrate, however, the film shares the same strong emphasis on traditional family values as its peers. From the very beginning Shiu is portrayed as a good family man who loves his wife and children. Even in his chase after money and vanity, he has always wanted his family to live a good life. It is only after he is deep into his addiction to gambling that he becomes ruthless to his family and the relationship comes to a breaking point. When he finally repents, he is full of regret that his father is already too senile to recognise him. His eventual effort to mend the half-broken family is celebrated as his rediscovered best virtue.

Correspondingly, the persistence of Shiu's wife in holding the family together is commended. Even when Shiu is at his worst, the film describes his wife Jane as tolerant and always finding ways to help her husband. The unfailing support from her and from Shiu's mother and elder sister is depicted as crucial in the protagonist's subsequent repentance. In this way, the film underpins the traditional roles of Chinese

women as sustainers in the family and their perseverance through hardships.

When it comes to the essential meaning of faith in God, *Return from the Other World* departs from most of the other local Christian films. There is no preoccupation with or even a single hint concerning life after death. Instead, by showing how a pathological gambler is saved from the devil's manipulation, the film presents the ultimate Christian hope as God's deliverance of humans from their worst problems in this life. Divine involvement in human life comes both directly in the form of spiritual confrontation as well as indirectly through the Christian church and its members. As such, the film presents a vision of hope that is unique among recent Hong Kong Christian films by its emphasis on divine intervention in this life.

3F.5. *Concluding Observations*

Contrary to the other three evangelistic films studied in this chapter, *Return from the Other World* does not exhibit an other-worldly orientation in its representation of Christian hope. Nevertheless, its approach in presenting a hope of deliverance in the mundane remains problematic. My examination of its narrative reveals that the film is unconvincing in its representation of the main character's transformation as a spiritual experience, and thus undermines the film's key message. Its explicit Christian perspective in the account of the conflict between good and evil as a spiritual warfare is problematic in the cultural-religious context of its primary audience in Hong Kong. The filmmakers have not demonstrated sufficient critical discernment in adapting one particular person's testimony into a story that is comprehensible to the public. Also, its fantastic form in portraying this spiritual conflict is reminiscent of Chinese ghost stories and the *wuxia* films which demand the

contemporary audience to suspend their disbelief rather than associate it with reality.

In other words, the film's lack of sensitivity toward the religious-cultural context and local cinematic conventions makes it questionable whether the intended theological message of God's omnipotence is taken seriously by the general audience. While pathological gambling is a real issue that confronts a considerable number of families in Hong Kong,⁹⁶ the fantastic manner in which the film handles the matter undermines its own effort to engage with the audience and offer a message of hope that is comprehensible to the public and that can be considered by the latter. In this way, *Return from the Other World* falls short of truly addressing an issue which is important to many among its potential audience.

3G. Conclusion:

Expressions of Faith on Screen and Local Popular Theology

In this chapter, I have analysed a representative sample of four Hong Kong films that were produced and released locally by Christian organisations in the beginning years of the twenty first century. In the analysis I focused on how the filmmakers put forth their faith claims in the narratives and identified the underlying theological motifs which run through these films. Although each film is unique as a motion picture, there are a number of common features in the theology they express. It should be noted that these common theological characteristics conveyed in the films

⁹⁶ According to the report of a large-scale survey released in 2002 (the same year that the film was launched), 78% of those surveyed (between 15 to 64 of age) were involved in some kind of gambling activities and 1.85% of this sample were categorised as 'possible pathological gamblers'. See: 'Report on a Study of Hong Kong People's Participation in Gambling Activities' (Centre for Social Policy Studies of the Department of Applied Social Sciences and the General Education Centre of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 2002).

are not born out of a vacuum. They are manifestations of a strand of theology which is popular among many Protestant churches in Hong Kong, and are related to both the historical and present contexts of Christianity in that society.

In the first place, the majority of these Christian films often express an escapist mentality. With the exception of *Return from the Other World*, all of the films present a form of spirituality that is in essence 'otherworldly'. The Christian faith is often equated with the belief in a specific form of life after death, in which the believers expect to reunite with their loved ones and continue their life together in a manner similar to the present life. The Christian hope lies solely in the hope for another world which is more serene than the turbulent present life. In short, the eschatology of these films not only focuses exclusively on the 'not yet' but is tied together with a particular interpretation of the shape of that future.

Closely related to the preoccupation with eternal life is the focus on the reward from above or gift from God rather than Christian responsibilities in this world. Although human life is mentioned as a mission to be accomplished, the nature of that mission is but vaguely presented and is understood as an individualistic mission of doing nice things to other individuals around. In other words, the ethical vision of these films is confined to the personal level.

It is this focus on personal ethics that informs the films' strong emphases on marriage and the family. Matrimony and family as a unity is always presented as the prime responsibility of a person and is celebrated as the primary good in life. Hence a person's greatest virtues are faithfulness in marriage and the maintenance of stability

in the family. Accordingly the best divine blessing in this life is to be married to a loving spouse who is always supportive regardless of any hardship. Correspondingly, the most celebrated roles of the spouses in all these films, be they the husbands or the wives, are to persevere and be sympathetic. In tandem, the singular emphasis on personal ethics also shapes the overall individualistic orientation of the films' narratives. All of the stories focus around the microcosmic world of the main characters and their personal problems, while the wider social contexts are hardly addressed.

In short, the theologies of Christian films in Hong Kong can be characterised primarily as escapist and secondarily as individualistic. Whereas the focus of my attention is on the escapism in the theologies rather than escapism in the stories, the latter is often a concrete embodiment of the former. As Deacy points out in his discussion on cinematic escapism and religion, the weakness of what he calls 'crass, sentimental, manipulative movies' is that they deny the audience the opportunity to come to a 'fuller understanding of how to address some of the core issues and dilemmas that lie in the heart of human existence – with its attendant sin, estrangement and suffering'.⁹⁷ Though more embracing of sentimental films, Marsh also suggests that a 'film watching habit which meant a person watched little else [apart from romantic comedies] might render a person incapable of registering negative aspects of life ... In theological terms, this would be like trying to live life as a constant reflection of resurrection without death (which would then be no resurrection at all)'.⁹⁸ If a viewing habit which focuses largely on romantic comedies

⁹⁷ Christopher Deacy, *Faith In Film: Religious Themes In Contemporary Cinema* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 38.

⁹⁸ Clive Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment: Film's Challenge to Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster,

is considered problematic, it is even more problematic when evangelistic films from Hong Kong become a supply of romantic sentiments without sufficiently addressing the tribulations in human life, whether on the individual or societal level. Moreover, the problem with these evangelistic films is more fundamental than that of sentimentality or escapism in a certain film genre. The issue in question is theological escapism which diverts attention away from struggles in real-life.

More important to my study, the escapism in these Hong Kong Christian films is not to be regarded as merely the expression of the personal faith of the filmmakers themselves but is indicative of the reality of escapist theology in the contemporary church. In the local context, this mindset of theological escapism finds its root in the early stage of the Hong Kong church in the 1950s. Before the middle of the twentieth century, churches in Hong Kong were part of the Southern Chinese parish and the idea of a 'Hong Kong church' was not yet in existence.⁹⁹ After the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949, Hong Kong was flooded with refugees, together with missionaries who were expelled by the new Chinese government as well as Chinese church leaders from all over the country who fled the atheist regime. Christian ministries among the refugees mushroomed and resulted in remarkable church growth.¹⁰⁰ Refugee mentality was prevalent among this generation of churchgoers, since the majority of them were uprooted from their homeland and considered themselves transitional residents in a temporary haven. Hence, a strand of

2004), 81.

⁹⁹ Ying Fuk-tsang, *Introduction to Christian Church History of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary, 2004), 81-82.

¹⁰⁰ Ying, *Introduction to Christian Church History of Hong Kong*, 173-183; Ying Fuk-tsang and Lai Pan-chiu, 'Diasporic Chinese Communities and Protestantism in Hong Kong During the 1950s', *Studies in World Christianity* 10.1(2004) 136-153.

theology that emphasised the 'other world' was particularly appealing. Hymns that expressed this mentality were often sung among Christian groups, such as 'This World is Not My Home, I'm Just a Passing Through' or 'The Cross before Me, the World behind Me'. Characterised by its escapist mentality which aspired to another world and despised the present one, this breed of spirituality became the guiding ethos of Hong Kong Protestant churches in the 1950s to 1960s.¹⁰¹

Entrenched in refugee mentality, this otherworldly spirituality emphasised personal piety and individual sanctification, and was indifferent to things which belonged to this age. The believer's sole responsibility in this world was evangelism, defined as converting other individuals to the Christian faith. The popular belief of the day, as seen in church slogans all around the territory, was 'believe in Jesus and have eternal life'. With this mindset deeply ingrained in the church, other aspects of Christian responsibilities or mission were often overlooked. The social, cultural, and cosmic dimensions of the Christian faith could hardly find their place in the theological agenda.

The dominance of this form of escapist theology among Hong Kong churches was understood to have subsided in subsequent decades, with the social concern awakening among a generation of locally born Christians in the 1970s and the challenge presented by the change of sovereignty during the 1980s and 1990s. Christian theological explorations on social, political, and cultural issues were said to be vibrant at the time.¹⁰² Nonetheless, my study in this chapter has found that the

¹⁰¹ Leung Ka-lun, *Minority and Minoritarianism* (Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary, 2002), 25.

¹⁰² Leung, *Minority and Minoritarianism*, 57-141; Carver Yu, 'Theological Development of the Hong Kong Christian Community in the Last Forty Years', *China Graduate School of Theology Journal*

expressions of faith in recent Hong Kong Christian films are plagued with a form of escapist mentality, which is characteristic of an earlier period of the Hong Kong church. As these evangelistic films are products of their own times, the prevalence of escapism in them indicates the existence of such mentality among some Hong Kong Christians. Furthermore, the fact that some of the films are enthusiastically embraced by many in the church suggests a possible resurgence of escapist theology in the territory.

Embedded with this escapist theology, these films exhibit a subtle disinterest in the social milieu and accordingly a lack of sensitivity to the sociocultural contexts of their production and reception. Hence, in the case of *The Miracle Box*, the immediate context which inspires its production (the SARS epidemic) becomes a passing appendix. In *Life is a Miracle*, the narrative is placed in an unreal setting that is far away from the experience of most of the film's local audience. When *The Source of Love* tries to address an important issue in the relationship between Christianity and Chinese culture (ancestral veneration), it does not demonstrate the necessary sensitivity to the Chinese perspective on the issue. Likewise, when *Return from the Other World* attempts to depict God's miraculous deliverance of the protagonist from evil, it adopts an approach which is problematic in the local cultural-religious context and cinematic convention. In other words, although these Christian films demonstrate a considerably high level of technical professionalism and look contemporary, their theological orientations are in essence out of touch with reality. Bound by their escapist theology, these films have not been able to engage the audience in the latter's real-life context. In terms of the expression of faith, this

25 (1998): 118-128.

disengagement from the audience's real-life situation awaits challenges and insights from the popular cinema of the same period. That is the subject to which I shall turn in the next three chapters.

Chapter Four

The Quest for Transformation from Undesirable Circumstances:

*The Infernal Affairs Trilogy*¹

4A. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I pointed out that evangelistic films produced in Hong Kong in the early twenty first century are commonly characterised by their escapist theology and individualism, and thereby exhibit a lack of connectedness with their sociocultural context. I have also shown that this phenomenon is symptomatic of the theological characteristics of many local Christians. In this and the subsequent two chapters, I shall analyse the popular cinema of Hong Kong of the same period to identify elements that can be brought forth to interrogate faith expressions by Christians in the popular media. Specifically I shall examine how the most popular films from those years engage with some of the most fundamental issues that confront the people and their society. The film to be studied in this chapter is the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy (2002-2003), which is widely regarded as one of the most important Hong Kong films produced in recent years.

While each of the episodes can be categorised into a different genre, the whole trilogy is basically a police and gangster film which centres around two moles – a policeman (Yan, played by Tony Leung) undercover in the drug gang and a gangster (Ming, played by Andy Lau) who has infiltrated the police force, as well as their boss-mentor on both sides (Superintendent Wong, played by Anthony Wong;

¹ *The Infernal Affairs Trilogy* (無間道系列), directed by Andrew Lau and Alan Mak, 2002-2003.

and drug kingpin Sam, played by Eric Tsang). The first episode is the core of the story which relates how the two sides compete to dig out the mole from the other side. Episode II is the prequel which reveals the complex history and intricate relationships of the characters. Episode III is a juxtaposition which brings together events that occur shortly before episode I and further developments ten months afterwards.

My purpose in this chapter is, first of all, to excavate the meaning of the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy in relation to its immediate sociocultural context of production and distribution, and then to identify the implications of that meaning to the public expressions of Christian faith. In concrete terms, I shall investigate how the film series interacts with its sociocultural context in the narrative text, subtext, as well as extra-textual non-diegetic components. My main contention is that as an entity,² the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy is a story which represents the subjective experience of many Hong Kong people during the years of political transition. Particularly it expresses the people's collective yearning for deliverance from their perceived hopelessness, which they compare with the punishment in the incessant hell of no escape. This cinematic quest for transformation is told through the use of socio-political allusions as well as popularised Buddhist motifs that are mixed with contemporary Confucianism and Daoism.

² Some critics and the film's co-director / co-writer Alan Mak acknowledge that it is possible to view the trilogy as three separate films, because the three episodes do not fall into exactly the same genre, their scopes are divergent, their production styles are varied, and there are inconsistencies in characterisations. My choice in this study is to consider the trilogy as a single entity, because the same core issues are consistently addressed throughout the series and are embodied in the developments of the same consistent group of main characters. It is only by regarding the whole trilogy in its entirety that a complete picture can be constructed as to how the series and its creators deal with the issues that they address. Hereafter in this thesis, unless specified otherwise, *Infernal Affairs* refers to the trilogy, and *Infernal Affairs I, II, III* refer to the respective episodes. For Alan Mak's view, see: 'Eastside Story: Interview of Alan Mak', *City Entertainment* 637 (11-24 September 2003), 42-43.

4B. The Popular Cultural and Religious Significance of *Infernal Affairs*

4B.1. *Commercial Achievement, Critical Recognition, and Audience Response*

The *Infernal Affairs* trilogy was an extraordinary phenomenon in Hong Kong cinema in the early years of the twenty first century. The sweeping commercial success, especially of the first episode, came as a surprise even though the film owner Media Asia had always regarded the project as what the film industry called a 'high concept'.³ Co-director / co-writer Alan Mak expected the film to gross somewhere between ten to twenty million Hong Kong Dollars.⁴ Executive Producer John Chong anticipated a 'medium high' box office gross, by which he meant around twenty five to thirty five million.⁵ When the film was scheduled for cinema launch on 12 December 2002, there was no full confidence among some theatre operators that it would sustain through the Christmas and New Year holidays. As it turned out, *Infernal Affairs I* was on screen for nearly three months, showing well beyond the Chinese New Year slot in February 2003. The box office record of more than fifty five million made it the top grossing film of the year and also one of the historical best sellers among local films in Hong Kong.⁶

³ For a detailed exploration of 'high concept', see: Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1994). For *Infernal Affairs* as a high concept film, see: Charles Leary, 'Infernal Affairs: High Concept in Hong Kong', in *Sense of Cinema*, 26 (May-June 2003) <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/26/infernal_affairs.html> [accessed 10 January 2008].

⁴ 'Eastside Story: Interview of Alan Mak', *City Entertainment* 637 (11-24 September 2003), 42-43.

⁵ 'Cineaste: John Chong Looks Back at *Infernal Affairs*', *City Entertainment* 643 (4-17 December 2003), 25-29.

⁶ The film which came second in that year's box office was *Hero* (dir. Zhang Yimou, 2002), which was basically a mainland China production with a predominantly Hong Kong main cast. It grossed only about half of *Infernal Affairs*, while the other films made far less.

In due course, *Infernal Affairs II* was released in the cinema on 1 October 2003, and then *Infernal Affairs III* was on screen on 12 December of the same year, exactly one year after the first episode was released. Though audience reactions to these subsequent episodes were mixed and they did not achieve the same exceptional level of commercial success as the first, the whole trilogy together grossed more than a hundred million dollars in the Hong Kong box office within slightly more than a year. At the same time, the story was bought by Hollywood and remade into *The Departed* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 2006), which won a number of Oscar Awards including Best Picture and Best Director.⁷

In addition to commercial success, critical approval toward the trilogy was also considerable. Its first episode took many of the major trophies in the Hong Kong Film Awards in 2003, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Actor, and Best Supporting Actor. Both of the subsequent episodes were nominated for Best Picture in the next Hong Kong Film Awards. At the same time, the Hong Kong Film Critics Society selected *Infernal Affairs II* as Best Picture and named the third episode as a Recommended Film in its annual awards. In 2007, *Infernal Affairs I* was further honoured as both the Best Film and Best Screenplay in the decade since the reversion of sovereignty.⁸

In general, critics and audience members consider the success of the series a

⁷ Comparing *Infernal Affairs* with *The Departed* is an interesting subject which strays away from the scope and purpose of this thesis. Elsewhere, I have done a brief conference presentation on the topic: Yam Chi-Keung, 'Memory, Identity, Violence: A Cross Textual and Cross Cultural Examination of *The Departed* and *Infernal Affairs*', presentation at 'Peacemaking in the World of Film: from Conflict to Reconciliation', 19-22 July 2007, Edinburgh.

⁸ The 'Best Film in a Decade' election was organised by Radio Television Hong Kong and co-sponsored by Hong Kong Film Award; trophies were presented in April 2007.

deserved outcome of the filmmakers' and distributor's extraordinary efforts. For instance, a review in the *City Entertainment* magazine, though sceptical of the film's use of religious motifs, expresses high regard for the plot, the script, the overall production quality, as well as the overwhelming marketing campaign, and considers these to be the major factors behind the film's success.⁹ Indeed, the marketers have successfully made the trilogy the focus of attention in the city's popular cultural scene during its release. As critic Bono Lee observes, the film's marketing campaign appeals to the people's emotion by positioning it as a local product which deserves the support of those who love Hong Kong. He further points out that the film has attracted a level of attention from newspaper columnists that was seldom seen among local productions, and eventually even some high ranking government officials and lawmakers talked about the film in public, thus giving it unusual exposures across different social strata.¹⁰ At the same time, enthusiastic response from the audience turns the film into a popular cultural event, and as Alan Mak observes, heated response in the internet was 'larger than the film itself' (as if it is 'larger than life').¹¹ Its popularity became a phenomenon of popular culture in Hong Kong as well as in neighbouring regions. In Hong Kong itself, the film's Chinese title *Wujiandao* (無間道) has since entered the daily vocabulary of the people and is often used to refer to extremely painful or difficult situations similar to those of the film characters, or sometimes taken to mean 'undercover' as a reference to the main characters' roles in the story.

⁹ Mr_Man 'The Name and Substance of *Infernal Affairs*', *City Entertainment* 620 (16-29 January, 2003), 90.

¹⁰ Bono Lee, 'Ten Thousand are Sacrificed for One to Succeed: the Myth of Rebirth of Hong Kong Film in 2002', in *Hong Kong Film Review 2002*, ed. Long Tin (Hong Kong: Film Critics Society, 2004), 13-14.

¹¹ 'Interview of Alan Mak', *City Entertainment* 637.

4B.2. *Continuity and Discontinuity with Local Cinematic Traditions*

While many audience members and popular reviews consider the strong cast as the film's most important feature, an elemental distinctiveness of *Infernal Affairs* is in fact the innovation that the filmmakers introduce into local film genres. In his review of the first episode, critic Sek Kei identifies that the film's breakthrough in Hong Kong cinema is to have put aside explosive actions and focuses instead on the mind game of the characters.¹² As a police and gangster story, the film relies on its filmic construction of psychological tension through editing and music score rather than resorting to excessive action and violence which characterise many Hong Kong productions. As such, the filmmakers have consciously broken away from the convention of Hong Kong cinema and pursue an alternative route in delivering the story. Film critic Pierre Lam even calls it a new direction for Hong Kong police and gangster films.¹³ In the second episode, the filmmakers ambitiously target at constructing an epic-like sensibility in what is actually a story of the underworld,¹⁴ and in the final episode, they build the drama on an introverted psychological journey of one character.

Notwithstanding these innovative treatments, *Infernal Affairs* is not a breakaway from established conventions in local film. Instead the trilogy does

¹² Sek Kei's Film Review, *Mingpao Daily News*, 14 December 2002.

¹³ Pierre Lam, 'Infernal Affairs: New Direction in Hong Kong Police and Gangster Films', in *Hong Kong Film Review 2002*, ed. Long Tin (Hong Kong: Film Critics Society, 2004), 177-178.

¹⁴ Some audience members have identified certain similarities between some sequences in this film and *The Godfather* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1972); for example: Kiddwai in Hong Kong Movie Database (HKMDB: <www.hkmdb.com>), 4 October 2003 <<http://www.hkmdb.com/column/kiddwai/kiddwai-0005.b5.shtml>> [last retrieved 2 November 2005]; Stanley Ng's web diary, 9 October 2003 <<http://www.stanelyng.net/09102003.htm>> [last retrieved on 5 September 2005].

exhibit strong continuity with several strands in the larger cinematic tradition of Hong Kong. First of all, its central plot of two equal and opposite male characters playing against each other puts it into the category of 'dual hero' film, a subgenre which has been popular among Hong Kong action films at least since the 1960s. In an open forum,¹⁵ Alan Mak admits that it is his conscious intention to approach from a new angle a 'dual hero' film, which he considers to be a major strand in Hong Kong cinema that has developed all the way from Chang Cheh¹⁶ in the 1960s to John Woo¹⁷ and Johnnie To¹⁸ since the latter part of the 1980s.

Most importantly, however, the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy belongs primarily in

¹⁵ Forum organised by the Hong Kong Film Critics Society on 26 January 2003; transcript of the forum found in the organiser's website: www.filmcritics.org.hk [accessed 1 December 2005].

¹⁶ Chang Cheh (張徹, also transliterated as Zhang Che, 1924[?]-2002) started writing for films in the 1950s and was most active in his writing and directing career in the 1960s to 1970s, during which time he made numerous Mandarin-speaking *wuxia* (sword fighting) and kung fu (fist fighting) films. He is commonly regarded as one of the great masters in these classic action genres in Hong Kong cinema. For comprehensive discussions of Chang Cheh, see: Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong*, 216-218; Ethan de Seife, 'Chang Cheh', *Sense of Cinema: Great Directors Critical Database* <<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/03/chang.html#b1>> [accessed 1 March 2006]; Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema*, 99-103; for his own view on making action films, see: Zhang Che, 'Creating the Martial Arts Film and the Hong Kong Cinema Style' (English translation by Stephen Teo), in Winnie Fu, ed., *The Making of Martial Arts Film – as Told by Filmmakers and Stars* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 1999), 16-24; and his autobiography *Chang Cheh: A Memoir* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2004).

¹⁷ John Woo (吳宇森) worked as the assistant director of Zhang Che in the early 1970s before his directorial debut, and openly honoured the latter as his mentor. After directing many films of varied styles for more than a decade, he established himself as an important action director in Hong Kong with *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) and several subsequent films, and gained his reputation outside East Asia with *The Killer* (1989). His works are characterised by the 'dual hero' as central figures as well as stylised, slow-motioned choreographic treatment of gun fighting scenes. He began directing for Hollywood in the 1990s and his career there thrived with *Face/Off* (1997), which is in fact a typical 'dual hero' film in its character design. For a comprehensive discussion of John Woo as a Hong Kong filmmaker, see: Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema*, 174-183; for a study on his film style, see: Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong*, 89-103.

¹⁸ Johnnie To (杜琪峰) started his production career in television in the 1970s and has made a wide variety of films since 1980, ranging from romance, comedies, and action films. He gained wider attention from audience and critics outside Hong Kong by the end of the last century through his stylised action works such as *The Mission* (1999) and *Running Out Of Time* (1999). For a discussion of Johnnie To as a film auteur, see: Andrew Grossman, 'The Belated Auteurism of Johnnie To', *Senses of Cinema* 12 (2001) <<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/12/to.html>> [accessed 1 March 2006].

the 'undercover' genre, which has been popular in Hong Kong ever since the early 1980s. For more than two decades, undercover has been a favourite subject matter among local filmmakers and audience. Most of these works are action films which tend to depict the tragic fate of police officers in undercover missions,¹⁹ while there are also comic treatments that make fun of the undercover identity.²⁰ Although undercover film has never been a dominant genre that is extraordinarily popular in Hong Kong cinema during any period, films on this subject matter are continuously produced and reasonably well received. In his study on the interrelationship between these films and the unique socio-political background of the city, Law Wing-Sang suggests that the undercover films are in fact expressions of the 'structure of feelings' of the people in Hong Kong, which is the product of the British colonial rule with its cultural and political formation.²¹ In fact, in terms of timing the emergence of undercover films in the early 1980s coincided with the surfacing of the issue of sovereignty change. The increasing tension and anxiety in the society were often implicitly expressed in these undercover films in the form of the dilemma of dual loyalties that entangled the characters. Hence Law calls this genre 'political allegory' and regards the *Infernal Affairs* series an important political allegory of contemporary Hong Kong after the change of sovereignty.

¹⁹ The most notable works include: *Man on the Brink* (dir. Alex Cheung, 1981), *City on Fire* (dir. Ringo Lam, 1987), *To Live and Die in Tsimshatsui* (dir. Andrew Lau, 1994), and *Young and Dangerous II* (dir. Andrew Lau, 1996).

²⁰ Notably the two roles played by Stephen Chow in *Fighting Back to School* (dir. Gordon Chan, 1991) and *King of Comedy* (dir. Stephen Chow, 1999).

²¹ Law Wing-Sang, 'The Violence of Time and Memory Undercover: Hong Kong's *Infernal Affairs*', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7.3 (September 2006): 383-402.

4B.3. Cultural-Religious Significance

4B.3.1 Using Motifs from Chinese Popular Buddhism

In addition to using important genres in the local film, the filmmakers also attempt to locate the story on a religious horizon that is akin to the cultural-religious sensibility of contemporary Hong Kong Chinese. Although Hong Kong people tend to perceive themselves as a pragmatic secular society, traditional religious rites and values are followed regularly by a large portion of the public.²² In *Infernal Affairs*, the most conspicuous use of explicit religious motif is certainly the original Chinese film title itself, *Wujiandao* (無間道). It is borrowed from the Buddhist notion of 'avinci hell', which means 'incessant hell' and refers to a terrain where the condemned souls suffer continuously and can never escape. Literally the Chinese film title means 'the way (*dao*) of the incessant (*wujian*)'.²³ According to the filmmakers, this conception of endless suffering refers to the circumstances of the two central characters, Yan and Ming, who are both entangled in their painful situations and can find no way out. This use of Buddhist motif is highlighted in the opening and ending of all three episodes through the use of CGI and captions, which in effect function as commentaries on what unfolds in the storyline.

Right from the start of the film series, a hellish atmosphere is audio-visually

²² May M. Cheng and Wong Siu-lun, 'Religious Convictions and Sentiments', in *Indicators of Social Development: Hong Kong 1995*, ed. Lau Siu-kai *et al.* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1997), 299-329.

²³ In her book-length study on *Infernal Affairs*, Gina Marchetti mistakenly interprets the meaning of *wujian* (無間) as 'nowhere', while in fact the term is a reference to time rather than space, and literally means 'no end'; hence 'unending' or 'incessant' are more accurate translations. Her misunderstanding is possibly the result of singling out the character '間' (*jian*), which can be used in both temporal and spatial references, as in '時間' (*shi-jian*, time) and '空間' (*kong-jian*, space). Yet in common Chinese usage, the term *wujian* is often taken to mean unending and seldom used as a reference to space. See: Gina Marchetti, *Andrew Lau and Alan Mak's Infernal Affairs: The Trilogy* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007).

established. The opening sequence of the first episode uses a computer-generated track shot of extreme close-ups on various parts of a Buddha statue in dark monotone, with fire burning underneath and around, thereby delivering a sense of punishment in hell. This motif reappears in the opening of the third episode. In the last shot of its brief first scene, when Yan turns around to face the camera with a bruised and bloody eye in a diabolic appearance, it suggests the hellish circumstance of his life in the gang and also establishes the overall tone of the episode. The subsequent opening credit sequence starts with a top shot of the elevator shaft. As the elevator descends and moves away from the camera, horrid faces of Buddhist statues appear on two sides of the shaft to communicate an impression that it is a descent into hell. While it is Yan and his fellow gangster who enter the elevator in the previous shot, the subsequent shot cuts to a stiff and sombre Ming stepping into a different elevator. This visual editing binds the destinies of these two characters together while at the same time suggests that they are falling into the incessant hell.

These visual clues are explicitly underpinned by captions at the beginning and end of each episode, which either quote or paraphrase different verses from Buddhist scriptures. With different wordings, they describe the characteristic of '*avinci* hell' as uninterrupted time, unlimited space, and continual suffering for fallen souls. Most significantly, after the final shot of the whole trilogy, which is in fact a flashback to Ming from the first episode, the caption quotes the Buddhist scriptures and reads: 'People of the like should be cast into the *Avinci* Hell, and will continue to suffer with no means of escape.' By this quotation, the filmmakers make an ultimate condemnation of the character of Ming.

Some local critics and audience members, however, are sceptical toward the religious aspect of the film. They critique these religious commentaries as sheer pretence as they see no other representations of the religious in the narrative apart from the opening and ending captions.²⁴ Nonetheless, a more visually sensitive examination of the film would show that this is not the case. Contrary to such criticisms, various forms of representations of the religious do emerge in different moments of the narrative and convey a sense of a spiritual dimension overpowering the human world.

One important component in this aspect is the use of religious sites as filming locations. For instance, the opening scene of the first episode is set in the Temple of Ten Thousand Buddhas, a famous Buddhist site in Hong Kong with which many local people are familiar. As a precedent to the main action in the story, this opening scene depicts gang boss Sam commissioning his boys to infiltrate the police force during his temple worship, and at the same time expressing his refusal of predestined fate. 'The way of each individual should be a personal choice,' he says. By locating the scene in a Buddhist temple, the filmmakers induce religious meaning into Sam's action.²⁵ The seemingly ordinary act of infiltration is thus charged with religious significance, and the commissioning of Ming into the police force becomes the induction to his spiritual journey in search of transformation.

²⁴ For example: Mr Man 'The Name and Essence of *Infernal Affairs*', *City Entertainment* 620 (16-29 January 2003), 90.

²⁵ As the screenwriters reveal in their commentary on the script, their initial idea was to locate this scene in an ordinary shopping mall; but after considering the character of Sam and their quotation of the *Nirvana Sutra* in the opening, they decide to find a location that is compatible with Sam's calibre and thus choose this temple. Source: Alan Mak and Felix Chong, *A Prequel to Infernal Affairs: Script and Writers' Commentary* (Hong Kong: Singtao Publishers, 2003), 41.

Another prominent example in this regard is in episode III, in the scene which depicts the first meeting between Sam and the undercover police from China who is disguised as an arms dealer. The whole scene takes place under the Lantau Buddha, which is a huge landmark and tourist site in Hong Kong. The scene is visually sandwiched between two low angle shots of the Buddha statue, with clouds being blown across the sky on top. This montage suggests a sense of a transcendental dimension dominating over the human actions on earth, while several of the human characters in the scene are struggling for their own destinies against predetermined fate. This sense of dominance is further enforced by the use of a tightly framed medium close up of the Buddha at the end of the scene, in contrast to the more spacious full shot used at the beginning of the same scene. Moreover, the conversation between Sam and the 'arms dealer' centres around beliefs in non-material matters such as the Buddha and *feng shui* rather than their arms deal. In these instances, then, the filming locations are not simply the physical settings in which the actions take place. Instead, they serve to instil a religious dimension into the human actions on screen.

4B.3.2 The Notion of Cyclical Time

Besides the explicit use of Buddhist motifs, a second religious component that is deeply ingrained in the story is the cyclical concept of time. Several elements in the narrative are arranged in such a way as to suggest a notion that history or time is circular despite the variations in actual historical details. The most prominent illustration in this aspect is the arrangement of the ending of the series. After the story ends with Ming sitting on a wheelchair on the hospital lawn, the film cuts back to a few days prior to the death of Yan to enable the audience to see the moment

before he enters the hi-fi shop in episode I. Thereby, the audience witnesses once again how Ming and Yan meet for the first time. At this point of the film the stories of Yan and Ming have already ended, yet the narrative is structured cyclically to create a feeling that it could start all over again from that point onward. A strong sense of life in repetition is conveyed. In fact, as co-writer / co-director Alan Mak acknowledges, the three episodes are structured as a circle, in which any of them can be the starting point of viewing.²⁶

Another manifestation of this cyclical concept is seen in the ironic circumstances of Superintendent Wong. Hoping to eradicate the drug gang in his territory, he conspires to murder the old gang lord who is in total control of the underworld. Yet it only leads to the rise of the new generation kingpin, who is more ruthless and merciless than his father, and ends up in infinite bloodshed and even the death of Wong's own long time partner. Then as he succeeds to get rid of this new kingpin, Sam, who used to be his buddy, takes the place and becomes his top adversary. Most ironically, in his battle against Sam, Wong himself is killed at the hands of the gang of this former buddy. Every time, Wong's elimination of an enemy only leads to the emergence of a new and stronger opponent, until at the end he is confronted with his buddy-turned-opponent who eliminates him. History as he experiences it is repetitious, and the only essential variation is the intensification of the problem. This cyclical notion of history and time is a popular belief among Chinese people, and is in fact informed by the Buddhist belief in reincarnation.²⁷

²⁶ 'Interview of Alan Mak', *City Entertainment* 637.

²⁷ For a substantial yet comprehensive discussion of the concept of reincarnation, see: John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1994), chapters 16-19; for the concept in Buddhism, see especially chapter 18, in which Hick notes that many contemporary Buddhist scholars prefer the term 'rebirth' to 'reincarnation' (332). He also remarks, 'The Buddha's teaching is pervaded by a tragic sense ... of the insubstantial and transient nature of all temporal

Because of the pervasiveness of this notion in the Chinese society of Hong Kong, its expression in *Infernal Affairs* could be readily accepted by the audience. Yet concomitantly its importance in the narrative could also be easily overlooked as it is taken for granted in the culture.

4B.4. Concluding Remarks

The *Infernal Affairs* trilogy was a remarkable commercial success beyond the expectations of many people behind the project. This achievement is often explained by the widely acclaimed production quality, the overwhelming marketing efforts, as well as its extraordinary cast. Although the filmmakers have taken some innovating moves that make the film series atypical of Hong Kong actions films and gangster movies, they have also aligned themselves with some of the important traditions in the local cinema. Above all, the trilogy is firmly located within the undercover genre which, as suggested by Law, is a symbolic manifestation of the collective experience of Hong Kong people who are perennially caught in the struggle of dual loyalties.²⁸ At the same time, by its extensive references to Buddhist motifs and imageries that are readily accepted among Hong Kong Chinese, the film partakes in the popular cultural-religious resources that are shared by the people. By so doing, the filmmakers not only build rapport with the local audience but also position the issues addressed in the film onto a religious horizon.

existence. To be born is already to have begun to die. Everything that comes to be passes away. Even the most apparently solid and enduring realities are in the process of dissolution' (332).

²⁸ Law, 'The Violence of Time and Memory Undercover'.

4C. *Infernal Affairs* as a Story of Hong Kong: Intertextual Connectivity with the Contemporary Hong Kong Experience

While most popular reviews of the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy focus their attentions on the entertainment aspect of the film series, a number of local critics have observed some kind of implicit interconnectivity between the recent circumstance of the Hong Kong society and various elements in the film, especially its storyline and characterisation. In other words, these critics regard *Infernal Affairs* as a story of contemporary Hong Kong. Such interpretations are particularly noticeable among those associated with the Hong Kong Film Critics Society and are evidenced in their articles collected in the annual *Hong Kong Film Review* published by that society.²⁹ Their views, though sketchy and varied, are nonetheless interrelated to one another. In this section I undertake a close reading of the film text and certain extra-textual materials within their immediate social context of production and reception, and also re-examine some of the claims by these local critics. My contention is that several aspects of the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy do betray subtle or even explicit interconnection with certain aspects of the recent situations of the city. These aspects in the film include the life-circumstances of the central characters, the use of the rooftop as locale for key moments in the film, the explicit references and implicit allusions in the narrative, as well as the design of marketing materials. Considered together, they do invite viewers to consider the trilogy as a story of Hong Kong people and society.

²⁹ Long Tin, ed., *Hong Kong Film Review 2002* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Critics Society, 2004) and *Hong Kong Film Review 2003* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Critics Society, 2004).

4C.1. *The Circumstances of the Characters as Allusions to the Subjective Experience of Hong Kong People*

In an article which analyses the phenomenal box office gross of the first episode of *Infernal Affairs*, critic Li Cheuk To remarks that the identity crisis portrayed in the film is close to the experience of Hong Kong people.³⁰ He observes that in the five years after the return of sovereignty (when the film was released in 2002), the crisis in confidence has deepened, the problem of identity crisis re-emerged, and values are shaken and confused; hence the depiction of double loyalty in the film finds resonance among the audience.³¹ Similarly, in an overall review of Hong Kong cinema of that year, Bono Lee comments that the hellish situation depicted in the first episode matches the condition of Hong Kong people who find themselves stuck in an inferno that offers no alternatives.³² As insiders of the society, both critics correlate the circumstances of the film characters with the subjective experience of Hong Kong people. Indeed their representations of the people's feelings are consistent with findings in ongoing public opinion polls, according to which the discontent of Hong Kong citizens was ever increasing shortly after the reversion to Chinese sovereignty. This discontent reached an unprecedented high during the period from 2002 to the summer of 2003, which approximately coincided with the time when *Infernal Affairs* was produced and shown. During that

³⁰ Li Cheuk To, 'The Revelation from the Box Office of *Infernal Affairs* and *Hero*', in *Hong Kong Film Review 2002*, 174-176.

³¹ In the article Li is in fact contrasting the box office performances of *Infernal Affairs* and *Hero* (dir. Zhang Yimou, 2002), both released in Hong Kong during the same time slot. Despite its equally strong marketing campaign, high profile cast, and high production value, *Hero* only attained less than half of the gross as *Infernal Affairs* in Hong Kong, although it swept the box office in mainland China and gained much international exposure. Li suggests that the pro-authoritarian ideology in *Hero* is unpopular among Hong Kong audience, whereas the identity struggle depicted in *Infernal Affairs* is akin to them.

³² Bono Lee, 'Ten Thousand are Sacrificed for One to Succeed', in *Hong Kong Film Review 2002*, 12-20.

period, only about 5% of the population was satisfied with the economic condition and less than 30% satisfied with the social and political conditions.³³

This widespread discontent at the time was the product of a series of unforeseen economic and socio-political crises since 1997. Economically the city had experienced nearly five years of downturn as the aftermath of the East Asian financial crisis, which hit shortly after the change of sovereignty. The magnitude of that economic recession was unheard of since the city's economic take-off in the 1970s. Socio-politically, a number of undertakings by the government had caused considerable unease among some sectors in the society regarding the relative autonomy of the territory. These include, most notably, the government's appeal to the National People's Congress of China to reinterpret the Basic Law (the mini constitution of Hong Kong) in the government's favour against a verdict by the city's Supreme Court. Crises such as these were commonly perceived as the outcome of ineffectual leadership. These are the social phenomena to which the film critics refer when they mention the crises in confidence and identity, the confusion of values, and the feeling of being locked up in an inferno with no alternatives. Although *Infernal Affairs* does not make direct references to any social incidents, there is nevertheless a correlation in spirit, or the 'structure of feelings'.³⁴ It is thus justifiable that the critics claim the main characters' inner feelings of continuously suffering in hell to be an allusion to the common feeling of Hong Kong people at that time.

³³ Regular polls conducted by the Public Opinion Programme, the University of Hong Kong <<http://hkupop.hku.hk/>>.

³⁴ Law, 'The Violence and Time and Memory Under Cover', 384-386.

4C.2. *The Locality of Major Incidents as Visually Embracing the Story within the City*

Another element in the film that points toward its significance as a story of Hong Kong is the use of the rooftop as a major locale for some of the key incidents. Far from being just an ordinary filming location, the rooftop plays an important role in the narrative and characterisation of the first episode. It is the locale of all three of the crucial scenes linked to the negotiation of identity of undercover policeman Yan.³⁵ Co-director Andrew Lau acknowledges that using the rooftop as a location for the undercover police is a deliberate break from his previous film about undercover, *To Live and Die in Tsimshatsui* (1994) which, he said, is ‘invariably dark’.³⁶ In *Infernal Affairs*, he wants to emphasise that an undercover is also a normal human being who should be able to see the light. Thus he intentionally puts the meetings between undercover police Yan and Superintendent Wong on the roof. He also emphasises that the major criterion for choosing the filming location is that it has to command a panoramic view, apart from other practical production concerns.³⁷

This choice of location enables the filmmakers to photographically locate Yan’s struggle over his double identity within the visual embrace of the whole city, suggesting subliminally that the character’s agony is the story of this city. More weight is added to this notion of ‘the story of this city’ when the actual site of the panoramic background is taken seriously – the cityscape in view is the Kowloon Peninsula, which is the most populated area in Hong Kong. Unlike the better known

³⁵ The rooftop as a site of Yan’s negotiation of identity is further discussed later in Section 4D.2.

³⁶ Thomas Shin, 'Interview of Andrew Lau', in *Hong Kong Panorama 2002-2003*, ed. Thomas Shin (Hong Kong: Arts Development Council, 2003), 67.

³⁷ Thomas Shin, 'Interview of Andrew Lau', 67.

skyline of the Island Central, which is often used to project a modern image of the city and betrays a sense of business and professional elitism, most parts of Kowloon is mainly inhabited by the common people. Covertly, the identity struggle of Yan is thus positioned as the struggle of everyman. Furthermore, the colour tone of rooftop scenes is telling. Although co-director Lau stresses the use of daylight, these scenes are always shot in greyish blue regardless of the weather, thus communicating a sense of gloom over the issue of identity. This gloominess is pushed further in a scene near the end of the final episode, in which two senior police officers secretly venerate Yan shortly after his death. The dark grey colour throughout the whole scene and the heavy cloud on top convey a sense of pessimistic doom. Although the director himself talks about letting the undercover see daylight, the visual design paradoxically betrays a sense of darkness in spite of the location which is supposed to be directly under the sun.

4C.3. *Representation of a Gloomy City in Promotion Materials*

In addition to being employed in the film, the imagery of cloudy cityscape is also adopted in the marketing campaign of all three episodes, primarily in the designs of their main posters used for advertisements. In the cases of the first and third episodes, although the posters tend to position the cast as the focal selling points, the cloudy cityscape imagery is nonetheless a conspicuous component. For instance, the poster for the first episode makes use of the final confrontation scene on the roof as its key image, in which Yan the undercover police points a gun at Ming the gangster mole (Figure 4.1). The predominantly black costumes of the two men make them stand out in the near-monotone image which is light bluish green on the whole. Although some blue sky can be seen at a distance, it appears to be hazy and

the clouds are thick. The top light of the shot imposes an unpleasant sense of high pressure on the characters rather than a happy feeling of being under sunshine. On the upper half of the poster, the close-ups of the miserable faces of the two characters add weight to the pessimistic outlook of the picture. Also, their poses facing opposite directions appears to suggest that one is the mirror image of the other, which corresponds to another important motif in the story.³⁸

Figure 4.1 Poster of *Infernal Affairs I*



³⁸ The mirror image as an important motif is discussed later in section 4D.3 in relation to the journey of Ming.

Figure 4.2 Poster of *Infernal Affairs III*



The poster for the final episode adopts an identical creative approach as that of the first – the whole is horizontally split into two parts, in which the upper half is a display of faces of the whole main cast, and the lower half builds on the rooftop scenes in that episode (Figure 4.2). The gloomy look is pushed to an extreme in this piece. The whole poster is almost solely in dark grey monotone. Except for the white collars of two, the seven characters on the top are all dressed in black. The lower part of the poster is a collage of two rooftop scenes from that episode. Most notably, overcast grey clouds are on top of the whole panoramic cityscape. This poster conveys a sense of uncertainty and frustration that has not emerged so conspicuously in the key visual image of the first episode.

Figure 4.3 Poster of *Infernal Affairs II*



Compared to the poster images of the first and third episodes, the promotion materials of the second episode, including the main poster and the trailer, are more explicit in positioning the film as a story of Hong Kong. Although the basic orientation of the poster remains unchanged, there is a noteworthy turn in its concept (Figure 4.3). Instead of a shot from the roof overlooking the Kowloon Peninsula, the key image is the skyline of the Central District of Hong Kong Island, with its numerous densely packed skyscrapers. This famous cityscape, which is often used as a visual representative of modern Hong Kong, is overcast with dark grey clouds in the poster, with just a glimpse of light trying hard to get through from above. Most strikingly, the most significant landmark on the island, the Victoria Peak, is hidden

behind the clouds. In this poster of deep blue monotone, the absence of a crucially important landmark conveys a sense of something seriously wrong with this place. The symbolic value of this missing landmark for Hong Kong can hardly be over emphasised. To the casual onlooker, it is one of the top tourist attractions that the city has to offer. For the local people, it is a symbolic embodiment of money, power, and colonialism. Not only is it named after Queen Victoria, it also used to be the residential area of all the high ranked colonial officials. Even today, it is still the locale of the most expensive luxurious residential housings in the city. At the same time, the Chinese name of the peak, Tai Ping Shan (太平山, literally 'peace hill') conveys a sense of blessing to the city. In this poster, this site of multiple meanings is covered up by dark clouds. In place of the Peak are two lines of words: 'It was the best of times... It was the worst of times...' ³⁹ This quotation from Charles Dickens is quoted more fully in the film's trailers to include: 'We were all going direct to heaven. We were all going direct the other way.'

By applying the Dickens quotes onto the Hong Kong situation, the marketing campaign intentionally directs the audience to perceive the film as a story of their city. This application is further underscored by an additional line of caption in the trailer which states: 'The forgotten time: 1991-1997'. Locating the story in a particular time frame in the city's recent history, the marketing strategy invites the audience to project their own memories from that period into the narrative. Concomitantly this strategy of appealing to the audience's memories is also used within the film itself by means of borrowing an old Chinese song *Time Forgotten* ⁴⁰

³⁹ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (unknown publisher, 1859), 1.

⁴⁰ *Time Forgotten* (被遺忘的時光), music and lyrics by Chen Hong Ming (陳宏銘), sung by Tsai Chin (蔡琴).

to be its recurring audio motif. The first few lines of the song are played repeatedly in several moments throughout the three episodes and have almost become an ‘audio trademark’ for the film. Though the song is from Taiwan and originally has nothing to do with the story at all, the melancholic mood and the third line (‘those time forgotten...’) serves to elicit the nostalgic sensibility of the audience toward their own recent history.

4C.4. *The Epic-Style Narrative Alludes to the Time of Transition*

On the textual level, *Infernal Affairs II* is primarily a gangster film which portrays the re-alignment of power in the underworld during the years approaching 1997. Among other things, the main thrust of the narrative depicts the crumbling of the old order and the winding path of how Sam transforms from being a loyal follower of the gang lord’s family to become the kingpin himself. There are in the film, however, direct and indirect references to the Hong Kong circumstances before and after the sovereignty change.

The most notable instance of direct allusion emerges near the end of the episode in the form of explicit political references through audio-visual recap of certain moments in the evening of the handover. These include the change of flag in the heavy rain, the change of government logo, the change of badges by police officers, and the fireworks over the city sky. There are even sketches of telecast images of the handover ceremony filmed through a television monitor. It should be noted that these recaptured moments are not only reminiscent of what many Hong Kong people have witnessed in the evening of 30 June 1997, but are closely tied in

with important moments in the narrative that signify crucial points in the developments of two of the major characters, namely gang boss Sam and senior police officer Wong.⁴¹ Because they are intertwined with the characters' life passages, these brief moments of political references are significant components of the story rather than mere gimmicks that are loosely attached to the narrative.

The film's interconnection with the collective experience of Hong Kong people is not limited to these explicit and direct references. As film critic Athena Tsui points out, *Infernal Affairs II* in its entirety recaptures the mental journey of Hong Kong people.⁴² The general mood of the gangster story betrays the melancholy of lamenting the dismantling of an old order when a new order is yet to be established, as well as the pessimism over the vacuum during the re-alignment of power. A visual foretaste of this pessimism is presented early on in the episode when Yan is expelled from the cadet school. As the cadet school principal tells him that he has to be ousted, the camera dollies-in from Yan's medium-wide shot toward his crying face, while on the classroom blackboard behind him, it is written in huge Chinese characters: '大英法律傳統' (THE LEGAL TRADITION OF GREAT BRITAIN). The shot finally becomes so filled up with the young man's close-up that the audience is blocked from several of the words. On the textual level, Yan's crying is of course lamenting over his own tragic destiny. But the visual juxtaposition of his crying, the words on the blackboard and the gradual blocking of those words is suggestive of a grief over the end of an era and the possible crumbling of the original order.

⁴¹ The developments of these two characters are discussed in details later in Section 4D.1.

⁴² Athena Tsui, 'A Long-Missed Tragic Sentiment', in *Hong Kong Film Review* 2003, 123-127.

In addition to the pessimistic foretaste, the re-alignment of power and the twisting of values are symbolically represented in an extensive killing sequence in the prequel. In both form and content, this sequence bears resemblance to the classical killing sequence in *The Godfather* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1972). In its form, it pulls together several simultaneous killing incidents through parallel editing, while the conspirer is portrayed as doing something that is seemingly righteous in another location. In content, it describes how the gang leader of a new generation wipes out the opponents from his father's generation. Despite these resemblances with the Coppola film, the sequence in *Infernal Affairs II* does exhibit a brilliant local twist. Here, the new generation gang lord Hau intentionally attracts the police to detain him, only to make use of the opportunity to present evidence against Officer Wong's conspiracy to murder his father. Apparently Hau is doing justice for his deceased father by exposing the dirty tricks of a corrupt police, but simultaneously he has planned for his subordinates to mercilessly exterminate the other gang leaders. Unlike the comparable sequence in *The Godfather* which uses a sacramental soundtrack of infant baptism to create ironic contrast, *Infernal Affairs* constructs a melancholic atmosphere for the killing sequence by using the tune of *Auld Lang Syne* played on the harmonica by one of the senior gang members during a killing scene. This mood fits aptly into the film's overall tone of lamenting the passing of an era. The old order in the days of the old gang lord has finally ended, and the power is now firmly in the hands of the new kingpin. This violent representation of power transfer is of course not a direct depiction of the Hong Kong situation; yet the nostalgic mood of remembering the bygone days would be shared by many in the audience, as reflected by the writings of the critics I have quoted.

4C.5. Concluding Remarks

In this section, my examination of certain crucial components of the text, extra-textual materials, as well as the immediate social context of production and distribution suggest that the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy can indeed be viewed as a story which represents certain important facets of Hong Kong. Although the local critics tend to be imprecise in their views, my analysis in this aspect supports the claims of some of them. I have found that the circumstances of the film's main characters of being trapped in adverse situations correlate emotionally to the general feelings of Hong Kong people around the time of the trilogy's production and release. The use of the rooftop as a major location serves to visually locate the character's personal struggle into the wider context of the whole city. The ambience of misery and anxiety over the crumbling of the prevailing order, and the recurring nostalgic mood over the 'time forgotten' finds resonance in the collective atmosphere of the society. Extra-textual elements, in particular the promotion posters and trailers, even explicitly invite the audience to interpret the film as a story of their own. On the basis on this understanding, in the next section I shall examine the vision of hope in *Infernal Affairs*, by digging into the major characters' inner struggle for their own transformation.

4D. The Vision of Hope as Represented in the Characters' Quest for Transformation

In an earlier section (4B) of this chapter, I have discussed the significance of *Infernal Affairs* in the context of the popular cinematic culture of Hong Kong and also its extensive reference to traditional Chinese cultural-religious notions that are

popular among Hong Kong people. These qualities of the film trilogy are important for the local audience to resonate with the film and claim ownership of the story as theirs. Then in the previous section (4C), I discussed several aspects of the trilogy in terms of intertextual connectivity with the social circumstances of post 1997 Hong Kong. I suggest that in various terms the film and its peripheral materials do encourage an interpretation that regards it as a story of the contemporary Hong Kong experience. Building on these, the present section investigates the most important component of this story, namely the inner struggles of the four major characters in their quest for self-transformation, which, in Christian theological terms, are their yearnings for redemption out of the extremely desperate life-situations.

In the drama, these journeys are interwoven together and are manifested through the intricate relationships between two pairs of opposing characters, namely senior police officer Wong and gang boss Sam, as well as their 'next generation' Yan and Ming. While the major portion of the first episode, as the central part of the whole story, narrates how the police and the gang try to outwit each other to uncover the mole on their respective sides, the prequel and sequel reveal the more profound psychologies of the characters and the intriguing dimensions of their interrelationships. Whether consciously or unconsciously, each of the four main characters exhibits a definite longing for transformation of his own identity and self, which is a desire to become a different person. This section is an analytical thick description of these journeys of the characters. Through this discussion, I shall demonstrate how *Infernal Affairs* presents a pessimistic view of their quests, and, when considered from within the framework of understanding the film as a story of Hong Kong, it represents pessimism over the situation of the city and its people.

4D.1. *Opposite Journeys to become New Persons:*

Police Superintendent Wong and Gang Boss Sam

Superintendent Wong and Gang Boss Sam first appear in *Infernal Affairs I* as the exact opposite of each other, representing unrelenting justice and relentless evil respectively. When the development of the two characters is reconstructed according to the chronological order of events in the storyline, however, it becomes clear that in their intricate journeys, the two have almost exchanged roles – in terms of who they are as persons, their personalities, and their outlooks on life. As the opening scene of episode II (the prequel) unveils, the two are not only good acquaintances but are actually very different persons from what they initially appear to be in episode I. Through the incidents that are told in the prequel, both men are confronted with failures in how they conduct their lives and, as a consequence, they renounce their original values and consciously choose to transform themselves into different persons. Their paths, however, go in opposite directions.

In the whole trilogy, there are several defining moments between these two characters, and most of these scenes appear in the prequel. Chronologically, the first defining scene is the opening of episode II, which is the long monologue of Wong telling Sam about his days as a rookie. This scene which marks the beginning of the whole story also establishes the starting point of the two men's journey. Wong is shown to be a pragmatic person who would befriend a gang member and asks the latter for a favour; he prefers Sam to be in charge of the turf because that would mean less trouble for the police. He is also a law enforcer who is frustrated with a legal system that fails to put the wicked under justice; he expresses regret over not

shooting the head of the boy who killed his colleague years ago, only to see the boy get rich in dirty businesses after being released from jail afterwards. This also provides the character motivation for his subsequent plot to murder the drug lord. Sam, on the contrary, shows himself to be a loyal man by refusing Wong's implied proposal to turn his boss in. Subsequently he is also shown to be a compassionate person who is caring for his wife and considerate to his subordinates.

The second crucial moment in their journeys is the time when they are both set up by the ruthless new kingpin and lose their significant others. This is the truly definitive point that sets them on their quest for transformation. When Sam realises that he is set up for murder and his wife is killed, he becomes a different person. The disillusionment of being sold out despite his loyalty turns him into the unrelenting evildoer in the eventual development of the story. In the case of Wong, the gangster's plan to get rid of him has his long time coworker killed by accident. Knowing that the plot is the retaliation on his conspiracy to terminate the old gang lord, he goes into a period of guilt-ridden self abandonment. Yet this period is also the inertia before his turning to a new direction and eventually evolve into a law-abiding officer.

In the third defining moment, the paths of the two men meet again on the beach in Thailand when Wong is commissioned to escort the hiding Sam back to Hong Kong to be the key witness against the gang lord. This moment marks the formal beginning of the transformation for both men. For Wong, it is the beginning of the road toward putting his life together after the period of self-abandonment. For Sam, expressing his tender feelings towards his late wife in front of his police friend

is the last time he is seen to display his compassionate side to anyone. Ironically, it is also a turning point in the relationship between them, as it is the last time they relate to each other as friends. Beyond this point their ways depart and they merely make use of each other to achieve their own respective goals. Wong wants to make sure that Sam can testify in court to nail down his number one opponent, whereas Sam takes advantage of Wong's police gunfire to take revenge on the killer of his wife.

This departure and their subsequent journeys culminate in the fourth defining moment, which depicts the city's change of sovereignty at midnight of 30 June 1997. On the part of Wong, at the same time he changes his own police badge from the colonial symbol to the Chinese one, he also puts Sam's picture on his notice board in place of the original drug lord who has died in his gunfire. Thereby he positions Sam as the new top opponent. The change of political allegiance coincides with the fundamental change in relationship and personal mission. A friend is formally repositioned as a foe. At the same time, on a personal level Wong has redeemed himself from a prolonged period of self condemnation and completed his journey of self-transformation. From a police officer who does not believe in the legal system, he has become a disciplined law enforcer; from one who befriends the gangsters as long as it helps keep things in order, he is now an upright official who does not tolerate illegal dealings. Also, by having shot the gang boss directly in the skull, he has redressed his regret for not having killed the young gangster on the spot many years ago.⁴³

⁴³ For a different understanding of Wong at this point, see: Gina Marchetti, *Infernal Affairs*, 123-124. Marchetti thinks that Wong has a 'sense of loss' toward 'the colonial administration and his memory of being an honourable member of the force'. In my view, this interpretation does not have sufficient evidence from the film's narrative.

In the same evening, Sam is shown to have risen to power and social status. In a room next to a banquet reception, Sam gazes tenderly at his late wife's picture. His inner sorrow is juxtaposed with the seemingly festive mood in the environment in the next shot, which superimposes the window reflection of his tearful face with the fireworks over the city sky; then he wipes his tears and enters the ballroom to cheerfully greet his guests. For Sam, the transformation he has found for himself is to suppress the past and all emotions involved. He is determined to become a different person, converting himself from being a loyal assistant, loving husband, and compassionate big brother to a stiff and merciless gang lord. Set against the background of Hong Kong's change in sovereignty, when the official identity of everyone in the territory is changed, Sam buries his past to embrace a new identity. As Marchetti rightly suggests, Sam 'literally "puts on a happy face", and, symbolically, moves on with his new identity / mask into the changes circumstances of the HKSAR'.⁴⁴

It is of course more than coincidence that the new lives of both Wong and Sam begin simultaneously with the change of Hong Kong's sovereignty. By means of this narrative arrangement, the filmmakers create a juxtaposition of the personal journeys of these two characters with the collective journey of the people of Hong Kong, which is suggestive of a correlation between them. That this juxtaposition is intentional is underscored by co-director / co-writer Alan Mak's statement that what they want to write about is the transition of people and the transition of an era.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Marchetti, *Infernal Affairs*, 123.

⁴⁵ 'Eastside Story: Andrew Lau and Alan Mak on *Infernal Affairs II*', in *City Entertainment* 637 (11-24 September 2003), 43.

Subsequently after Wong and Sam complete their journeys of transformation, the audience is shown their direct confrontation in the extended drug dealing sequence early in episode I.⁴⁶ In terms of dramatic structure, this is the ignition point that escalates and intensifies the conflict between the two characters, which ends up with the superintendent being brutally killed by the gang. Eventually it also leads to the confrontation between the two moles, and to Sam being killed by his own mole. What Wong and Sam have done throughout the journeys are actually stripping off their memories of the past, altering their own outlook on life, changing their ordering of friends and foes, and redirecting their subsequent paths. While Sam attains power and status, he loses his human qualities; Wong regains his dignity as an upright police officer but loses his life. As such, this film has painted a gloomy picture for these two characters' quest for transformation.

4D.2. *The Strive to Live in Broad Daylight: Undercover Policeman Yan*

Yan is the only character in the series that is determined to change his own destiny right from the very beginning of the story. Being the illegitimate son of the old gang lord, he makes conscious efforts to redeem himself from this undesirable 'original sin'.⁴⁷ The decision to join the police force represents his extreme measure

⁴⁶ From a creative and production point of view, this sequence is a major factor which sets *Infernal Affairs* apart from most police-gangster films in Hong Kong. The sequence builds up the tension between the police and the gang by bringing together simultaneous events occurring at several locales through brilliant parallel editing and a unified music track instead of appealing to violent actions. The main threads which link together the different events are the secretive messages that the two moles send to inform their respective secret bosses. By intercutting between Wong and Sam, the personalities of the two characters are fully established in how they react to one situation after another.

⁴⁷ Here I am using the term 'original sin' in its casual sense which refers to the dark side of a person's past, rather than a strictly Christian theological sense. This follows film critic Thomas Shin who suggests the idea of regarding the story of *Infernal Affairs*, in particular that of Episode II, as a narrative 'in search of original sin'. See: Thomas Shin (單志文 / 登徒), '*Infernal Affairs II* Turns Limitation into Advantage' (無間道 II 化限制為優勢), *Hong Kong Film Review* 2003, 131. In

to adopt a new identity which is the total opposite of the gang. The old identity, however, keeps haunting him even after he is enrolled the cadet school. His strive to live in broad daylight never really succeeds. His longing to be publicly recognised as a policeman is only realised after his death.

Yan's deliberate effort to distance himself from the gang world and assume a new identity is hindered by his own family background. He is expelled from the cadet school when his true identity of being the son of a gang lord is accidentally discovered. For the sake of retaining his desired police identity, he accepts the offer to become an undercover agent. Ironically, his mission is to infiltrate his own family business. Thus Yan's old identity, which he is so desperate to disown, continues to haunt him. Paradoxically it is only by assuming the old identity (gangster) that he can embrace a new identity (police), but at the same time this new identity can neither be claimed nor made known to anyone. While he lives with a dual identity, he is only known to everyone as a gangster.

Yan's anguish over this double identity is vividly represented in his relationship with his girlfriend, who only appears momentarily in the first two episodes. In the girlfriend's only appearance in the prequel, she informs Yan that she has aborted their baby, because she does not want the child to have a father who is

Christian theology, original sin refers to 'the state of sin in which mankind is held captive since of Fall'. See: 'Original Sin', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (3rd Edition), ed. F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingston (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1202-1204 [1202]. As a doctrine, it has been the locus of much debates over the centuries. For recent in-depth studies of the doctrine, see, for example: Tatha Wiley, *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, and Contemporary Meanings* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2002), in which the author locates it within the history of Christian doctrines, and proposes a position of the doctrine in contemporary feminist and liberation theologies. Alternatively, Henri Blocher, in *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999), takes a more traditional approach to defend the doctrine through detailed exegetical studies on related passages from Genesis and Romans.

always involved in gang fighting and always needs to be bailed. Then in the immediately following scene which happens right next door, Yan's half brother Hau, who has assumed the gang's top position after their father's death, invites him to become more involved in the family business and Yan silently consents. The contrast between these two scenes exemplifies Yan's inexpressible agony of double identity. When he is just rejected by his girlfriend for an identity which he tries hard to abandon, straight away he has to pretend to embrace that same identity for the sake of his secret mission. This sense of agony is further deepened in a scene in episode I, where Yan comes across his ex-girlfriend and her little daughter, without knowing that it is actually his daughter, and hence also without knowing that his ex-girlfriend has not really rejected him.

Yan's struggle over his double identity, as pointed out earlier (section 4C.2), is epitomised in a main locale, namely the rooftop of a commercial building.⁴⁸ The directorial choice of using the rooftop invites multiple layers of understanding. First of all, it symbolises Yan's own urge to live under the light while his life is one that is destined to hide in darkness. Second, it also works ironically as a place of 'darkness under the sun'. Although the rooftop is a place where no one is under any cover, it is also a location where nobody would normally go and thus provides an ideal cover for Yan's dealings with his police supervisor. Third, the location enables the cinematographer to situate Yan's negotiation of identity against a panoramic backdrop of the cityscape. Through this visual treatment, the film superimposes this character's struggle over identity into the wider context of the whole city, and

⁴⁸ While Marchetti also discusses the use of the rooftop in this film, hers is an overall discussion of the use of rooftop in general within her treatment of 'space', and briefly mentions its use in a handful of old US American films. It appears that she has not noticed the significance of this particular rooftop in the film. See: Marchetti, *Infernal Affairs*, 44-50.

thereby subtly suggests to the Hong Kong audience that it is their story.⁴⁹

In the first rooftop scene the distress of Yan over his double identity is most unambiguously expressed in the exchange between him and Wong. Yan directly confronts his police supervisor and protests that there seems to be no end to his undercover mission. As he has been repeatedly arrested for assaults, Wong questions whether he has lost his mind and forgotten that he is a policeman. Yan counters with discontent, ‘You said it was just for three years, and then there were three more years, and then still three more years. Now it is almost ten years, boss.’ When Wong demands him to be more courteous and threatens to erase his files to let him be a gangster forever, Yan reacts bluntly, ‘What do you want me to do? Remind myself that I am a cop everyday? Shouting “put down your gun, I am a cop” even in my dreams?’ This strong reaction expresses his anguish of being entangled in the dual identity and his desperate urge for deliverance from this hellish situation. Nonetheless it is a deliverance that Wong is unable to promise, and he simply shifts to talk about practical matters about the gang’s business.

Yan’s tragic circumstance at that point is intensified by the narrative arrangement of sandwiching the rooftop conversation between two very short scenes, which capture glimpses of the funeral of the cadet school principal. These two very short scenes, which are made up of only a few slow-motioned shots and no spoken lines, are significant in expressing the tragic destiny of Yan. On the one hand, the death of the principal means that the recovery of Yan's identity becomes solely dependent on Superintendent Wong, since they are the only two people who know

⁴⁹ See section 4C.2.

about this undercover mission.⁵⁰ On the other hand, the cinematographic treatment of the scene adds weight to the sense of tragedy that Yan can only salute his principal secretly in a dark sideway instead of openly paying tribute in the funeral. With a near-silhouette back shot of Yan in the dark, saluting the hearse which passes in the broad daylight at a distance, it visually suggests that Yan's true identity is destined to be hidden in the dark and cannot reach out to light.

The second rooftop scene, which immediately precedes Wong's murder by the gang, intensely dramatises the deepening of Yan's identity crisis. It portrays another secret meeting between Yan and Wong, during which the latter considers to terminate the mission because he realises an imminent threat to the safety of both of them. The meeting is abruptly cut short because of gangster pursuit. Yan manages to escape and pretend to join his fellow gangster instantaneously after they arrive, but only to witness that Wong's body is thrown down from the building and lands on the taxi right behind him. That he immediately finds himself stuck in the crossfire between the police and the gangsters dramatically externalises and symbolises his conflicting dual identities. At the same time, the dead body of his mentor in front of him also leaves him in a void, because, with the death of this last person who knows about his undercover mission, Yan's police identity appears to be unverifiable.

In the third rooftop scene, Yan's striving to reclaim his desired identity is presented as a competing negotiation for identity with his counterpart Ming, which is crystallised in a few lines:

⁵⁰ This is the case at least from Yan's own point of view and also in the knowledge of the audience in episode I. In episode III, it is revealed that there are other senior police officers who know about Yan's mission. It is, of course, very possible that the arrangement in the final episode is an afterthought.

Ming: Give me a chance.

Yan: How?

Ming: I had no choice before. Now I want to choose to be a good guy.

Yan: Good. Talk to the judge, see what he has to say.

Ming: You want me dead?

Yan: Sorry, I am a cop.

Ming: Who knows that?

Here, each pushes for his own preferred identity to be recognised but is refuted by the other. This direct confrontation between the two moles, which comes as a result of Yan's accidental discovery of Ming's gangster identity after the death of Superintendent Wong, ends with Yan's own death at the same location. In this way, Yan's quest for transformation is depicted as going in the same way as that of his mentor – both end prematurely, and both come to an end at the same place.

The rooftop sequence on Yan's identity is brought to a completion in the final episode, in a scene which depicts two high level officers secretly paying veneration to him on the rooftop shortly after his death. Nevertheless, the secretive nature of this simple ritual means that it is not a full recognition of Yan. It is only through his psychiatrist that, months later, Yan's desired identity is rediscovered and his remains are moved to the police cemetery.

In the entire narrative of the trilogy, the whole life of Yan is presented as an extended paradox. From the very beginning of the story, he has been trying to renounce his 'original sin', which is his family background of being the illegitimate son of a drug kingpin. Yet he is forced to publicly re-embrace this unwanted identity

in order to be able to secretly adopt a desired new identity. His yearning for deliverance from evil has been denied during his lifetime. Although his significant moments of seeking transformation are related to the rooftop with bright daylight, he is forced to live in darkness throughout the story till the end of his life. As in the case of Wong and Sam discussed in the previous section, *Infernal Affairs* exhibits total pessimism toward Yan's quest for transformation. Viewing the trilogy as a story of Hong Kong would suggest that it is also pessimistic toward the predicament of Hong Kong people. The filmmakers appear to imply that there can be no end to the torment of the people in this city as their identity remains unresolved.

4D.3. *Quest for Transformation in the Mirror Image: Gangster Mole Ming*

Viewed in its entirety, the *Infernal Affairs* series is arguably the story of Ming. Although as the counterpart of Yan, his dramatic role is more or less equal in importance to the latter, he is the only one among the four main characters who does not die a sudden death in the course of the story. He is therefore the one with whom the whole narrative ends. Moreover, the main storyline of the third episode is told from Ming's point of view, and the entire episode is an account of his ultimate fall to hell despite his desperate attempts to work himself out of it.

As in the case of Yan, Ming also goes through a process of betraying his original identity and striving for a new one. Unlike his counterpart, however, Ming does not have a clear idea of what he wants at the beginning of the story. His desire to discard his gangster identity and become a real police officer only comes much later during his infiltration into the police force. As co-writer-director Alan Mak points out, the young Ming is just an ordinary kid who does not have a sense of

direction; he is an opportunist who does whatever he thinks would benefit himself.⁵¹ Thus from his earliest appearance in the story onward, he is seldom seen to express his own preference but simply follows instructions from superiors, whether it is to assassinate the old gang lord or to infiltrate the police force. When asked of his own will, he often says 'it doesn't matter'.⁵²

Whereas the symbolic site in Yan's search for transformation is the rooftop, in Ming's case it is the mirror image of himself.⁵³ Although it only appears for a few seconds in the first two episodes, his mirror image becomes a major dramatic motif in the final episode and dominates the progression of the narrative. In episode I, the earliest glimpse of this motif comes into sight during a montage sequence which introduces the early days of Ming and his counterpart as undercovers. In one instance, right after Ming has finished a telephone conversation at a roadside store, presumably with his gang boss, a close up captures him gazing at his own image in a small mirror with an ambiguous expression. This shot visually marks the beginning of Ming's journey of searching for himself through dealing with his own mirror image.

Another brief but significant appearance of the mirror image motif is in the

⁵¹ Interview of Alan Mak in the video: *The Making of Infernal Affairs III* (Media Asia Films, 2003).

⁵² Marchetti's interpretation that Ming 'wants to destroy his triad mentor Sam in order to possess Mary' implies that he is a person of purpose even as a young man. This understanding can find support neither from the film text nor the filmmakers' own understanding of the characters. See: Marchetti, *Infernal Affairs*, 126.

⁵³ The use of Ming's mirror image is also noted by Marchetti. Since her focus is on surveillance and Ming's schizophrenic behaviour, however, she puts Ming's gaze into the surveillance camera and his gaze into the mirror in the same category. While she does have a valid point, there is an essential difference between the two types of images – Ming can see his own image in the mirror, not in the camera.

prequel, in the scene when Ming betrays Sam's wife, Mary, whom he has promised to protect. In a short scene which closely resembles the previous telephone call scene, Ming calls the gang to inform them of her whereabouts. In an almost identical way, a close up shot captures his ambiguous expression as he gazes into a small mirror after putting down the telephone. By this call and the subsequent scene, in which he watches from a distance the brutal murder of Mary, Ming is established in the story as a villain. This is not only because Mary is his boss's wife whom he has promised to protect, but more significantly because she is the woman whom he secretly admires. He offers to be Mary's man in place of Sam when he believes that his boss is already killed by the gang. Yet, right after this proposal is bluntly rejected by Mary, he makes the call of betrayal. As such, the filmmakers characterise Ming as an opportunist who has a weak sense of right or wrong. Nevertheless, his gaze into the mirror is so ambiguous that it can also be understood as a visual suggestion of his going through an inner struggle and is puzzled over who he really is.

As Ming climbs the career ladder in the police force, the object of his gaze becomes his own warrant card of a senior inspector instead of the mirror, and his confident smile in the photograph in uniform has taken the place of the previous ambiguous look. It becomes clear to him that he now prefers to be a real police officer rather than a mole for the gang. In fact his actions in the middle part of the whole story are his working out of his own way to discard the gangster identity. At that point, Ming seems to have found a path which he is determined to tread. Yet, in order to redeem himself from being a gangster, he has chosen an extreme path to cover up and betray his old identity. Thus he stages a well-planned police operation against Sam, and in the course kills the latter. By annihilating the potential threat

which can haunt him with his old identity, he clears away the principal obstacle that stands in his way of self-transformation and simultaneously becomes the hero in his police team.

The mirror image motif becomes more pervasive and figurative in the third episode, which is in essence an account of Ming's desperate but futile fight for his own transformation. Early on in the episode, after a sequence which recounts the police department's final verdict that clears the doubts against Ming regarding the death of Yan and another police, he is shown to be still uncertain of the department's trust and asks his superior, 'You guys trust me, don't you?' Despite the official statement of confidence from the department, he still exhibits a deep sense of insecurity. A very brief shot, which captures Ming with his blurred image in front of his office glass window, is visually suggestive of his uncertainty and insecurity over his own destiny. The reflected image is neither the ambiguous look from his younger days nor the confident smiling face in the warrant card, but an image that cannot be seen distinctively. His drastic move to eradicate gang boss Sam and a fellow mole in the police force has merely led him into a deeper sense of anxiety, which in turn leads to an even more desperate urge for transformation.

This intense desperation, which becomes Ming's psychological obsession manifested in his new search for mirror image, is a motif fully developed in this final episode. Specifically, it establishes Yan as the mirror image of Ming. That is to say, Ming projects his own self onto Yan and, in his subjective world, assumes the latter's role. This is first evidenced in the self-confession scene which involves Ming and Yan together in the therapy room, in an ingenious manipulation of time and space.

The scene begins as Yan's hypnotherapy session in which he confesses to the therapist his true identity as an undercover, but then it shifts to become the confession of Ming. In this cinematically manipulated time and space, the two characters pick up each other's line and drink the same glass of water. Their identities are further intermingled by the filmmakers' use of cutaways – whenever Yan speaks of his inner struggle, the shot is on Ming, and vice versa. This simple yet remarkable use of film language subtly suggests that the two are mirror images of each other, and that Ming is assuming the other's identity in his own mental construction. Moreover, this visual treatment also ties the destinies of the two main characters together and emphasises their similarities in terms of their suffering and shared yearning for redemption. Although playing opposite roles, both of them want to put an end to their undercover assignments and bury their gang identities.

The film's portrayal of Ming's assumption of Yan's identity is even more direct and overt in a subsequent scene, in which Ming is depicted as seeing Yan's face when he looks into the locker mirror. The relaxed smile he exhibits at that moment forms a sharp contrast from the stiff expression which he has put on throughout the rest of the film. In his false consciousness, he has finally resolved his own crisis, and this is achieved by replacing his identity with that of Yan. At the same time, he also picks up the latter's line, 'everything will be okay after tomorrow'. In the first episode, the same line has been used by Yan to assure his therapist on the day when he originally plans to arrest Ming but ends up being killed. Toward the end of episode three, the line is used by Ming as he prepares to arrest another senior officer whom he imagines to be a mole. Before the operation, he leaves a recorded message at the therapist's mobile phone, saying, 'Everything will

be okay after tomorrow, I shall arrest Ming myself’.

The mirror image motif culminates in the final confrontation sequence toward the end of the episode III, in which Ming leads his internal investigation team to arrest the imaginary mole. For Ming, the mirror images work both ways – not only has he adopted the identity of Yan but also projected his own onto the officer whom he is about to confront. Regardless that the evidence he presents on the scene are actually against himself, he warns his target, ‘Lau Kin Ming, this is your last chance, don’t miss it’. Ming, at this point, is totally absorbed in his own constructed world – he imagines himself to be Yan and is investigating Ming. When this delusive self defence is torn down, he shouts hysterically, ‘I work so hard helping you guys to kill all of Sam’s moles. Why can’t you give me a chance? I just want to be a good guy. Why don’t you give me a chance? Why?’ With the break down of his self-deception, his mirror images are shattered and the innermost question in his yearning for transformation comes to the surface. His query of why his gangster background and mole identity cannot be pardoned indicates that Ming’s deepest longing is unconditional acceptance. This longing is manifested in the urge to transform from his old identity of being a gangster to a new identity of becoming a real police officer. His longing is so deep seated that even after the serious brain damage which results from his failed suicide attempt, his subconscious adoption of Yan’s identity never ceases. In the subsequent scene, the motionless and expressionless Ming is still doing what Yan used to do all the time – tapping Morse code with his finger.

In addition to the narrative elements discussed above, the filmmakers also

subtly betray extra-diagetically their own creative intention on Ming's longing for a new future. As film critic Athena Tsui perceptively observes, the Chinese name of Ming has gone through a very subtle but significant alteration after the first episode.⁵⁴ While his full name is Lau Kin Ming throughout the whole trilogy, the middle character 'Kin' has been changed from '健' (with a vertical stroke on the left) to '建' (with no vertical stroke on the left). Although the difference is almost unnoticeable, and Kin Ming is an extremely common name in Hong Kong, there is a significant difference in the meaning of the two words despite their similarities in form and pronunciation. The character used in the first episode '健' (with a stroke on the left) means 'healthy', whereas the later form '建' (no stroke on the left) means 'construct'. Since the character for Ming (明) means 'bright' and is also related to 'tomorrow', the earlier version of Kin Ming (健明) should be taken to mean 'a healthy and bright future', whilst the altered version (建明) would mean 'to construct a bright future'. As Tsui points out, this change in the name is far from accidental, since it is consistent throughout all the props, ending credits, and promotional materials. A plausible explanation would be the filmmakers' development in their own ideas – after completing the first episode they want to underscore Ming's need and conscious effort to work for his transformation, to construct a brighter future for himself. In other words, they become aware that Ming does not automatically have a bright future but has to sweat for it.

Parallel to the pessimism over Yan's destiny, the film is equally gloomy

⁵⁴ Athena Tsui, 'In Search of an Exit in *Infernal Affairs III*', in *Hong Kong Film Review* 2003, 132-135.

toward the yearning of Ming. His ‘original sin’⁵⁵ of having a gangster identity is unforgiven, neither are his extreme measures to eradicate those who bear linkage to his true identity. As the final caption in the last episode states, longevity in the incessant hell is the worst punishment, and this is exactly what Ming is left to face – mere existence without self-determination and self-consciousness. Viewing the film as a story of Hong Kong, this is also expressive of the fear of some Hong Kong people – while they cannot erase the past identity which they have never consciously chosen for themselves, their conscious efforts to embrace a new identity are also rejected.

4D.4. *Concluding Remarks*

In this section, I have discussed the personal journeys of the four main characters in *Infernal Affairs* as manifestations of the film trilogy's vision of hope. Through the extended narrative of three episodes, the filmmakers show the audience how these characters put aside their original identities and strive to adopt new ones. Wong develops into a respectable law-enforcer from one who uses whatever workable means to achieve his goals. In contrast, Sam turns into an indifferent and ruthless drug dealer by suppressing his original compassionate personality. Yan does whatever he can to disown his background of being the illegitimate son of a drug kingpin and tries hard to embrace an opposite identity, only because he wants to see himself as a good person. Ming also tries to cast away his gangster identity to assume a socially acceptable role. A common characteristic of their personal journeys of self-transformation is that they are motivated by dissatisfaction with their own destinies. When they realise that their original approaches to life are no longer

⁵⁵ See Section 4D.2 footnote 46.

feasible, they embark on the quest for self-transformation to deliver themselves from the undesirable entanglement in life. All of the journeys of transformation in the film, however, come to tragic ends. In other words, the vision of hope presented in *Infernal Affairs* is in fact a negative vision, or a vision of hopelessness. Through its portrayal of the quest for transformation of four major characters, the film series put forth a pessimistic view that none of the quests is achieved.

4E. Conclusion: the Relevance of *Infernal Affairs* for the Public

Expressions of Christian Faith

In this chapter I have studied the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy with particular attention to how the film connects with its social, cultural, and religious milieu. In addition to its wide recognition as a product of popular culture, a number of local film critics and at least one local scholar of cultural studies have pointed to the interrelationship between the film and the social milieu, and regard the trilogy as a story which represents certain aspects of Hong Kong during the period of transition before and after 1997. As I examine the trilogy within its immediate sociocultural context of production and distribution, and also consider how it has been received in its own primary market, I find that a number aspects of both the film itself and its marketing discourses do exhibit interconnectivity with the contemporary experience of many people in Hong Kong. For instance, the circumstances of the main characters echo with the subjective experience of many local people; the use of the rooftop positions the crucial moments in the life of the undercover police within the visual embrace of the city; the creative approach of the film posters convey a sense of gloominess of the place; and the narrative style, especially of episode II, explicitly alludes to the time of political transition of Hong Kong. In short, *Infernal Affairs* can

indeed be regarded as a narrative representation of the recent experience of many Hong Kong people from the 1990s to the beginning of the twenty first century. Concomitantly the film also incorporates popular cultural-religious motifs from Chinese Buddhism, which has in fact incorporated elements from Daoism and even Confucianism. By so doing, it locates the issues it addresses on a religious level. Informed by these cultural-religious expressions in the film, in my analytical thick description of the characterisation, I regard the developments of the major characters throughout the trilogy as journeys in search of transformation. In sociocultural terms, they are endeavours to transform their own identities. From a theological standpoint, these quests for transformation are the yearnings to put aside their old selves and become new persons. Interpreted against the sociocultural backdrop of what Hong Kong has gone through since the 1990s, such quests can be manifestations of the people's hope for deliverance from a perceived situation of perpetual hopelessness and the longing to construct a new future.

The vision projected by *Infernal Affairs* through the characters' journeys is, nonetheless, pessimistic. None of the characters ultimately accomplishes his transformation, even when it is a reverse transformation which leads to moral downfall. In the case of Sam, who is determined to bury his compassion and become a ruthless gang boss, he is murdered by the mole he plants in the police force. When Wong has succeeded to recover from self-abandonment and turns into a law abiding officer, he is killed by the gang of his former buddy. Yan's desired identity of becoming a good man is publicly recognised only after his death. Ming's desperate efforts to bury his undesirable past only lead to his own collapse and end up in perpetual suffering in his own mental incessant hell. Viewed as a story about

contemporary Hong Kong, this pessimistic outlook represents the filmmakers' grave pessimism toward the situation of their own society. It is a sentiment that no hope is in view for the people of Hong Kong regardless of their desperate efforts to find a way forward.

With regard to the relevance of the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy to the public expressions of Christian faith, two major points can be highlighted on the basis of my analysis of the film. First, it is noteworthy that underneath an exciting police and gangster drama, the film skilfully expresses a deep seated feeling of many people in Hong Kong at the time, which is the pain of being entangled in a perceived sense of prolonged hopelessness. Although the film's outlook is pessimistic, it also expresses the yearning for transformation, which is a longing to break away from the old identity to construct and embrace a new one. Second, it should also be noted that in the film's expression of these fundamental issues that confront the people, it refers extensively to local cultural and religious resources. This engagement with resources, including themes and motifs, that are readily shared by the urbanised Chinese audience in Hong Kong facilitates the film's rapport with its local primary audience. In comparison, the Christian productions discussed in Chapter Three are lacking in both of these characteristics demonstrated by *Infernal Affairs*. As I have pointed out, they are generally disengaged from the social reality and are ill-informed of the local cultural-religious sensibility. These are thus the main aspects in which *Infernal Affairs* can interrogate the Christian films, which, in this thesis, are taken to be representative of the expressions of Christian faith in public.

Apart from these, the negative vision of hope presented by *Infernal Affairs*

also constitutes a challenge to the public expressions of Christian faith. From a particular Christian point of view according to Moltmann, hopelessness is a 'sin'.⁵⁶ When the society is in the midst of a widespread sense of despair, when the people are self-consciously entangled in prolonged hopelessness, the challenge for Christian communities is how to communicate a Christian sense of hope in this contemporary Chinese society where there is little background in the Christian faith and where Christians are a tiny minority.

⁵⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (London: SCM, 1967), 22-26.

Chapter Five

Countering the Anxiety of Marginalisation: *Shaolin Soccer*¹

5A. Introduction

In this chapter I continue the study of contemporary Hong Kong cinema with *Shaolin Soccer* (2001), which became the top grossing local film in the history of the city during its theatrical release that summer. In the same manner as my discussion on *Infernal Affairs* in the previous chapter, I scrutinise *Shaolin Soccer* in relation to its immediate sociocultural context of production and distribution, with supportive reference to writings by local audience and critics, and aim at identifying the major challenges that the film poses to the expressions of Christian faith in public. The film has been dismissed by some as being just another nonsensical and farcical comedy from the director Stephen Chow,² and therefore does not deserve serious attention. In contrast to such dismissals, my contention is that when viewed within its primary social context, *Shaolin Soccer* is to be understood as an irreverent expression of the circumstances of many Hong Kong people in the years subsequent to the city's change in sovereignty. In particular, it points to the people's collective anxiety of being marginalised in the altered political-economic situation and the fear of being supplanted in the economic progress of China. While I have suggested in the previous chapter that *Infernal Affairs* can be regarded as a story that expresses the

¹ *Shaolin Soccer* (少林足球), directed by Stephen Chow, 2001.

² Despite his massive popularity in Hong Kong and other East Asian societies since the early 1990s, as well as his sizeable fandom among university students in mainland China, Stephen Chow is a much neglected figure in scholarly writings on Hong Kong popular culture. Writing from Taiwan, social commentator Nan Fang Su (南方朔) states that Chow has been neglected by intellectuals because of their long-held preference for tragedy over comedy, and yet Chow's ever-increasing popularity in recent years has eventually made him unignorable to them. See: Nan Fang Su 'Nonsensical Sense' (無厘頭的有厘頭), in *Yazhou Zhoukan* 18.44 (31 October 2004).

subjective experience of many Hong Kong people during the transitional period, similarly *Shaolin Soccer* can also be viewed as a story of Hong Kong and its people which brings to the surface the unspoken anxieties of many. In addition to this expression of anxiety, the film also presents a vision of hope by portraying the protagonist's unrelenting quest against the entanglement in a seemingly hopeless situation.

In this chapter, therefore, after identifying the film's importance in relation to local popular culture, my discussion will focus first on how the film is regarded locally as a story of Hong Kong people and then on the vision of hope that it presents. Finally I shall conclude by looking at the major challenges that the film poses to the Christian praxis of the expression of faith in public.

5B. The Significance of *Shaolin Soccer* in Hong Kong Popular Culture

Before *Shaolin Soccer* reached the cinemas in Hong Kong in July 2001, there was considerable uncertainty concerning its potential for commercial success among the local audience. This uncertainty was a consequence of the general disappointment toward the box office performance of the actor-director's previous film, *King of Comedy* (1999),³ despite the fact that Stephen Chow had been the top grossing actor in Hong Kong throughout the 1990s.⁴ The mixed feeling of the market toward *Shaolin Soccer* was tersely expressed in a few lines in the issue of

³ *King of Comedy* was on screen in Hong Kong during the Lunar New Year holiday, which is traditionally the best peak season in local cinema. It grossed slightly over HKD 25 million, a mediocre figure when compared to the more popular films of Stephen Chow.

⁴ According to the calculation by film critic Sek Kei, Stephen Chow was the top grossing actor in Hong Kong throughout the 1990s. The total box office gross of his films up to 2001 (including *Shaolin Soccer*) was more than HKD 100 million. See: Sek Kei, 'The Moleitau Hero of Stephen Chow' (周星馳的無厘頭英雄), in *Ming Pao Daily News*, 13 January 2005.

City Entertainment biweekly which was published concurrently with the film's cinema release.⁵ According to this local magazine, some of the audience regarded *King of Comedy* as a breakthrough from Chow while others considered it a complete letdown; but it also stated that many people in Hong Kong would still anticipate Chow's new film with eagerness because they had been enjoying his jokes for a whole decade.

As it turned out, *Shaolin Soccer* remained on the screen for eighty five consecutive days, and created a box office record for local films with its total gross of HKD 60,739,847,⁶ a record which was to be surpassed more than three years later by *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004) from the same director. In addition to its commercial success, the film also received a high level of critical recognitions, as evidenced in the many prizes it won across several local film awards of different orientations. Most significantly it was honoured as the best picture in all of the major film awards in the city in the same year.⁷ Yet the importance of this film is beyond its sweeping success in the box office and achievements in film awards. In this section I shall examine the special position of *Shaolin Soccer* in the popular cultural scene of Hong Kong and point out how Stephen Chow has attempted to connect more significantly with the local cinematic tradition in this film and also did seek transformation as a filmmaker.

⁵ *City Entertainment* 580 (5-18 July, 2001), 43.

⁶ When all films, local and foreign, were counted, *Shaolin Soccer* was the first runner-up. The top-grossing film released in Hong Kong was the Hollywood production of *Titanic* (dir. David Cameron, 1997), which made more than HKD 100 million in the cinemas.

⁷ These include the Hong Kong Film Award, the Golden Bohemia Award (operated by the Hong Kong Film Critics Association) and the Hong Kong Film Critics Society Award.

5B.1 *Transformation of Stephen Chow's Iconic Stature in Hong Kong Popular Culture*

As a number of commentators have pointed out, the influence of Stephen Chow in Hong Kong popular culture is more than being a top-grossing actor; his impact is evidenced in the widespread *moleitau* (nonsensical) phenomenon that he has created in local popular culture in the 1990s. In a book chapter which discusses the relationship of Stephen Chow with the Hong Kong identity,⁸ Bono Lee comments that Chow is 'emblematic of Hong Kong people' (134) and that his use of language is 'representative of the Hong Kong identity' (138). In a paper which reviews the filmmaking career of Chow, He Gu describes him as a miracle in Hong Kong cinema and that he has initiated a creative revolution in the local film industry by his unique style of comedy.⁹ In another review of Chow's career, Sek Kei remarks that as a filmmaker he is a representative of Hong Kong culture.¹⁰ In short, these cultural and film critics concur that Stephen Chow has attained iconic stature in local popular culture over the years since he began his acting career in the early 1980s.

Subsequent to completing the acting training course at the local media empire, the Television Broadcast Limited (TVB), Chow was assigned to host the

⁸ Bono Lee(李照興), 'From Nonsensical Voice to Postmodern Hero: Stephen Chow and the Hong Kong Identity' (無厘頭發聲到後現代英雄: 周星馳與香港身份), in *Hong Kong Postmodern* (香港後摩登) (Hong Kong: Compass Group, 2002), 133-142.

⁹ He Gu (何故), 'Stephen Chow: A Myth in Hong Kong Cinema' (周星馳: 好一個香港影壇神話), in *A Symposium of Film Critics from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong* (兩岸三地影評人研討會論文集), ed. Chan Pak-sang (陳柏生) (Hong Kong: Film Critics Association, 2005), 247-258.

¹⁰ Sek Kei, 'The Moleitau Hero of Stephen Chow', *Mingpao Daily News*, 13 January 2005.

station's children's programme *Shuttle 430* for four years before he had the opportunity to play major roles in a number of television serials in 1987. His unique style of comic performance, especially the special use of language and creation of slang, soon caught the attention of a wider audience and the film industry. After performing in supportive roles in a few films in subsequent years,¹¹ his career began to thrive in the early 1990s when he played the leading roles in several successful blockbusters.¹² Since then, Chow established his position in the industry as the most popular film comedian among the Hong Kong audience. His film career moved beyond acting in the mid 1990s as he began co-directing some of his films and branded them as 'works of Stephen Chow'.¹³ *Shaolin Soccer* was his debut in full directorial control.¹⁴

Chow's famous approach to comedy acting, which is commonly known as *moleitau* (無厘頭), is a form of wordplay that relies on Cantonese pun and that creates comic effects by the character's apparently illogical and nonsensical responses to the situation. According to Hong Kong sociologist Ng Chun Hung, the term first became popular in the city in the late 1980s when the audience called

¹¹ Although none of his early films were box office success, his talent was recognised as his film acting debut *Final Justice* (霹靂先鋒) (dir. Pakman Wong, 1988) won him a Best Supporting Actor Award from the 25th Golden Horse Award in Taiwan.

¹² The most notable early hits in Chow's film acting career include, among others: *All for the Winner* (賭聖) (dir. Jeff Lau and Corey Yuen, 1990), *The God of Gamblers II* (賭俠) (dir. Wong Jing, 1990), *Fight Back to School* (逃學威龍) (dir. Gordon Chan, 1991), all of which grossed more than HKD 40 million.

¹³ These include: *From Beijing with Love* (國產零零漆) (co-dir. Lee Lik Chee, 1994), *Forbidden City Cop* (大內密探零零發) (co-dir. Vincent Kok, 1995), *The God of Cookery* (食神) (co-dir. Lee Lik-chee, 1996), *King of Comedy* (喜劇之王) (co-dir. Lee Lik-chee, 1999). Chow also co-wrote these and some other films.

¹⁴ Lee Lik Chee, the co-director of several of Chow's previous films (see previous note), is credited in *Shaolin Soccer* as the deputy director.

Chow's performance *moleitau* because they regarded the way he acted in the television serial drama *The Final Conflict* (蓋世豪俠) (TVB, 1987) as nonsensical.¹⁵ Many of Chow's lines from television dramas and films soon became part of the people's daily vocabulary, and resulted in what was called the '*moleitau* culture' in Hong Kong in the 1990s.¹⁶

As Sek Kei points out, nonsensical acting is by no means the invention of Chow but is common among many comedians both locally and elsewhere. It is however the specific social and political circumstances of Hong Kong in the early 1990s that provides a fertile ground for the colossal popularisation of Stephen Chow's nonsensical style. Sek Kei further observes that the mischievous attitude in Chow's films, with their plots that typically portray the final victory of the nobody, have been therapeutic to the people during the aftermath of the Tiananmen crackdown of 1989 and the countdown toward the change of sovereignty in 1997.¹⁷

¹⁵ Quoted in *Yazhou Zhoukan* 18: 43 (24 October 2004). A famous line in that drama which immediately became a catchphrase in the city was: 'sit down, have a cup of tea and a bun', which was nothing peculiar in itself but comic effects were created as the line was repeatedly uttered regardless of the situation.

¹⁶ It should be noted that despite the predominantly local characteristics of Stephen Chow's *moleitau* language, his fandom has grown far beyond Hong Kong, especially to other East Asian societies. Remarkably, in mainland China Chow has attracted myriad followers in university campuses where his films and *moleitau* style are studied as postmodern cultural phenomena. His massive popularity among mainland Chinese intellectuals is itself an interesting phenomenon but is beyond the scope of this thesis. Some commentators have explained this phenomenon as the educated Chinese young people using the *moleitau* language as a tool of liberation from the suffocating dogmatism and repressive culture of the country (See various articles in *Yazhou Zhoukan* 18.43, 24 October 2004). Yet Hong Kong film critic Lit Fu (列孚) remarks that mainlanders' enthusiastic response to Chow is merely an outcome of 'cultural misinterpretation', which is a result of their ignorance of Hong Kong popular culture since the 1970s. See: Lit Fu (列孚), 'The Cultural Misinterpretation of Stephen Chow's Films', in *I am an Actor* (我是一個演員), ed. Chan Yuen-ying (陳婉瑩) (Guangzhou: Nanfang Daily Press, 2005), 46-48. Similarly, another Hong Kong film critic Chan Yu also comments that mainlanders tend to misread Chow and often mistake those films in which Chow only plays the leading roles as his own works. See: Chan Yu (陳榆), 'The Real and False Stephen Chow: How Moleitao Interpretation from the Mainland has Misread Stephen Chow's View of Romance' (真假周星馳 – 大陸的無厘頭詮釋如何誤讀周星馳的愛情觀), in *A Symposium of Film Critics from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong*, 233-246.

¹⁷ Sek Kei, 'The Moleitao Hero of Stephen Chow', in *Mingpao Daily New*, 13 January 2005.

Likewise, Bono Lee also remarks that the language and gesture of Stephen Chow often become a means of ventilation for Hong Kong people who lack the channel of expressing their hidden unease and fear that have accumulated during the 1990s.¹⁸ With a different emphasis, Esther Cheung comments that Chow's language has injected fresh energy into daily Cantonese, and that his 'constant renewal in action, language, and rebellious spirit' can provide 'ideal texts' for understanding societal change.¹⁹

Notwithstanding his well regarded status in local popular culture, Stephen Chow was apparently at a low time during the making of *Shaolin Soccer* and was in need of a breakthrough. According to the reporter of *City Entertainment*, Stephen Chow suddenly made a sober remark at the end of their interview with him, saying that he made *King of Comedy* because his love life was at risk and he made *Shaolin Soccer* because his career was at risk.²⁰ This relatively unnoticed remark is revealing, especially when read against the background of his relative commercial failure in *King of Comedy* and the fact that Chow has 'experienced great difficulty in finding financial support' for *Shaolin Soccer*.²¹ It suggests that the filmmaker was at the time conscious of the need for breakthrough and that *Shaolin Soccer* could be his effort in this direction. Hence, while the film bears many of the typical features of

¹⁸ Bono Lee, 'From Nonsensical Voice to Postmodern Hero', 137.

¹⁹ Esther Cheung (張美君), 'Falling for Master Sing and the Master of the Fox Cave' (情陷星爺和狐狸洞洞主), in *I am an Actor*, 14.

²⁰ *City Entertainment* 580 (5-18 July 2001), 45.

²¹ Siu Leung Li, 'The Myth Continues: Cinematic Kung Fu in Modernity', in *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*, ed. Meaghan Morris *et al.* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press / Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 55.

Stephen Chow's works, with all its exaggerating narrative style and *moleitau* moments, there are also traits that he attempts to outgrow his own old path. An important effort in this direction is to capitalise on some of the elements in Hong Kong popular culture that have been well received among the younger generations, such as Japanese manga-anime and computer role-playing games (CRPG). Specifically, some critics associate the film with the Japanese manga *Captain Tsubasa*,²² which has been vastly popular among young people in Hong Kong in the 1980s and 1990s,²³ and many of the action scenes in the film are reminiscent of computer role-playing games (CRPG) in their excessive and repeated violence.²⁴ Such endeavours represent Chow's effort to extend his appeal to an audience that is not his loyal fanbase. In terms of commercial performance, the impressive box office gross of *Shaolin Soccer* indicates that these efforts have been successful in attracting additional audiences beyond the original fandom of Chow.²⁵ More significant than these use of existing ingredients in local popular culture, however, is Chow's attempt to locate the film within what is often regarded as the most

²² For example: Long Tin (朗天), 'A Computer Game World which Involves China-Hong Kong Football Strategy' (指涉中港足球攻略的電子遊戲世界), in *Hong Kong Film Review 2001*, 12-15.

²³ *Captain Tsubasa* is a serial manga about the soccer dream of a group of Japanese youngsters who eventually become professional players in Brazil and Europe. It is created by Yoichi Takahashi which has first appeared in Japan in the youth magazine *Weekly Shonen Jump* in 1981 and the story is still being continued at the time of this writing. In Hong Kong, the manga has been translated into Chinese and published locally while the television series have been dubbed into Cantonese for broadcast, creating a sizeable fandom across a few generations of young people.

²⁴ In this regard the film has been criticised as 'overdoses of CGI' (Bono Lee in <<http://www.filmcritics.org.hk/index.php?mod=iZine&cmd=showCAS&caID=123>> [accessed 1 March 2006]); 'unrestrained and discomfoting' (Wong Fen in <<http://www.filmcritics.org.hk/index.php?mod=iZine&cmd=showCAS&caID=123>> [accessed 1 March 2006]); and reducing football into series of shots by angry strikers (Long Tin, 'A Computer Game World', 13-14).

²⁵ Besides being the top-grossing local film of all time during its cinema release, the box office income of *Shaolin Soccer* was also 50% higher than Chow's previous top grossing film. This suggests that the film has attracted a new audience who are not Chow's long-time fans.

influential cinematic tradition of Hong Kong cinema – namely the kung fu action film. I shall discuss this aspect of the film in the following pages.

5B.2 *Extension of an Important Cinematic Tradition in Hong Kong*

Though *Shaolin Soccer* appears to be a film about football, Stephen Chow implicitly admits in an interview that he considers it a martial arts film. He also acknowledges that he has always wanted to make action films that are categorically different from what others have done by integrating kung fu with other elements.²⁶ In addition, Chow's filmography is also indicative of his inclination toward kung fu action films. While he has made himself famous through comedies, it should not be overlooked that most of his previous co-directed works contain heavy doses of martial arts.²⁷

Chow's own enthrallment with kung fu films should be appreciated as part of a general fascination with the genre in Hong Kong cinema since the early 1970s. Over the subsequent decades, action films have constituted a major genre in the local film industry, and their voluminous export to different parts of the world has made action movies almost 'synonymous in the West with Hong Kong cinema'.²⁸ As a genre, Hong Kong action films in general and kung fu films in particular have made a significant impact in global cinema.²⁹ Arguably kung fu action films constitute the

²⁶ Responding to the question of why he has made *Shaolin Soccer*, Stephen Chow says that he considers himself a kung fu fan and not a football fan. See: *City Entertainment* 580 (5-18 July 2001): 43.

²⁷ *From Beijing with Love* and *Forbidden City Cop* are action comedies; *The God of Cookery* relies heavily on martial arts sequences, especially toward the latter part of the story; *King of Comedy*, while basically a human drama, also consists of action-packed scenes at the beginning and end.

²⁸ Gary Needham, 'The Post-Colonial Hong Kong Cinema', in *Asian Cinemas: A Reader and Guide*, ed. Dimitris Elfttheriotis and Gary Needham (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2006), 62.

²⁹ The transnational phenomenon of Hong Kong action cinema has been picked up by various

most important genre in the cinema of Hong Kong, and in *Shaolin Soccer* Stephen Chow attempts to position himself as an heir of this heritage. This association with the kung fu film tradition is evidenced not only in the prevalence of martial arts sequences in the film, but more significantly in its tributary references to as well as thematic affiliation with the tradition.

In the first place, *Shaolin Soccer* unabashedly pays tribute to one of the founding fathers of the kung fu genre, Bruce Lee (1940-1973), who has attained iconic status by popularising kung fu and kung fu films around the world through a mere handful of works before his untimely death. He is also the one figure with whom Stephen Chow openly claims to be particularly fascinated on numerous occasions. In *Shaolin Soccer*, Chow acknowledges this legendary figure right at the beginning of the story through the mouth of the protagonist Mighty Steel Leg (played by Stephen Chow himself), who addresses him as ‘the august and memorable Mr. Bruce Lee’. Additionally, the film makes reference to Bruce Lee through one of its characters, the Shaolin Team’s goalkeeper Magic Hands, whose look and mannerisms are reminiscent of the kung fu icon. In the final match between the Shaolin and the Evil Team, when Magic Hands has to be substituted for serious injury, the scene is handled as a salutation to Bruce Lee, with Mighty Steel Leg saying to him, ‘Though your body has to leave, you spirit will be everlasting.’

scholars in film and cultural studies in recent years. For overall discussions of the phenomenon, see: Meagan Morris, 'Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema: Hong Kong and the Making of a Global Popular Culture', in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 5.2 (August 2004): 181-199. For specific discussions concerning different cultural contexts including Korea, India, France, Japan, see various chapters in *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*. For its early reception in the USA, see: David Desser, 'The Kung Fu Craze: Hong Kong Cinema's First American Reception', in *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, ed. Poshek Fu and David Desser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 19-43.

More important than these tributes to the kung fu icon in the film narrative, the thematic concern of *Shaolin Soccer* is closely connected to the classical theme of the kung fu genre, which, as Siu Leung Li has suggested, encapsulates the bitter encounter of Chinese tradition with western modernity since the late nineteenth century.³⁰ In their ‘original form’ of the early 1970s, Hong Kong kung fu films were often set in China of the late nineteenth to early twentieth century – the late imperial and early republican era, during which China was under constant imperialist threat.³¹ The heroes in those kung fu films were often depicted as patriots who fought against the villainous invaders with their superb physical abilities.³² In his study of this ‘original form’ of kung fu films, Siu Leung Li identifies in them an underlying ‘contest’ between Chinese tradition and western modernity, which is a tension that goes beyond mere nationalism or patriotism.³³ Despite the subsequent transformation or ‘re-packaging’ of kung fu cinema in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the original spirit of the genre is maintained.³⁴

³⁰ Siu Leung Li ‘Kung Fu: Negotiating Nationalism and Modernity’, *Cultural Studies* 15 (2001) 3/4: 515-542; see also his: ‘The Myth Continues: Cinematic Kung Fu in Modernity’.

³¹ Siu Leung Li ‘Kung Fu: Negotiating Nationalism and Modernity’.

³² This is best exemplified by the films of Bruce Lee, especially *Fist of Fury* (精武門) (1972), which depicts Chen Zhen (陳真), the young disciple of Huo Yuan Jia (霍元甲), a legendary master in martial arts in the late 19th to early 20th century, as defending the honour of his nation and his martial arts school against Japanese humiliation. Ever since then, the stories of these two and other related figures have been retold in numerous television dramas and films and enjoy perennial popularity in various Chinese societies. A recent cinematic retelling of the legend is *Fearless* (霍元甲) (dir. Ronny Yu, 2006) in which Jet Li plays Huo Yuan Jia and was vastly popular among Hong Kong audiences during the Lunar New Year cinema release that year.

³³ Siu Leung Li ‘Kung Fu: Negotiating Nationalism and Modernity’, 536-537.

³⁴ In the late 1970s the genre, which used to be seriously patriotic, crossbred with slapstick comedy and gave birth to kung fu comedy; in 1983, with the police stories of Jackie Chan, kung fu films adopted a contemporary urban look for the first time. See: Siu Leung Li ‘The Myth Continues’, 54.

Against this backdrop, there is little doubt that *Shaolin Soccer* can be viewed as a continuation of the kung fu cinema in its thematic concern, since a negotiation between the traditional and the modern is indeed central to its plot. This theme first of all emerges in the self-proclaimed mission of the film's protagonist, while at its core the whole storyline is a portrayal of how his uncompromising vision is realised. In this negotiation, Chow even proposes a resolution of integrating the old and the new, which I shall further discuss in a later section (5D.3). Additionally, the film's final sequence of the match between the Shaolin and the opponent Evil Team is presented primarily as a battle of the authentic expression of tradition versus the abused expression of modern technology, in addition to being a confrontation between good and evil. In that sequence the Shaolin team is presented as the genuine manifestation of traditional martial arts while the Evil Team is portrayed as using forbidden drugs imported from the USA to boost the players' physical ability to a level that beats the Shaolin.³⁵ Though expressed more subtly than in previous kung fu films produced three decades earlier, the tension between Chinese tradition and western modernity still emerges in this story which is set in the China of today. In short, despite its packaging as a comedy about football, *Shaolin Soccer* is in essence a kung fu film that follows closely the genre's thematic tradition. In the making of this film, Stephen Chow attempts to connect himself to what is arguably the most important strand in the cinematic culture of Hong Kong.³⁶

³⁵ Siu Leung Li points out an irony that *Shaolin Soccer* has to utilise 'modern technology' (such as CGI) to popularise Shaolin kung fu. This point is, however, beyond the scope of discussion of this chapter. See: Li, 'The Myth Continues', 53-59.

³⁶ Chow's continues with this endeavour in his next film, *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004); see Chapter 6.

5B.3 *Concluding Remarks*

In this section, I have discussed the significance of *Shaolin Soccer* in the popular culture and cinema culture of Hong Kong. While it is a film of Stephen Chow, its significance does not lie merely in his iconic status but rather in his endeavour of transforming himself in his filmmaking career, as evidenced in the creative approach of the film. In the film, he has retained in essence the style of *moleitau* comedy and the basic plot of the final victory of the underdog, which are the elemental factors that have made him an extraordinary phenomenon in popular culture for more than a decade both in Hong Kong and in neighbouring regions in East Asia. At the same time he also makes an effort to expand his audience base and steps into previously untouched terrain by engaging with certain popular elements in local youth culture, such as Japanese manga-anime and computer role-playing games. Apparently, this effort has been successful, as the record-breaking box office figure suggests that the film has likely reached a whole new group of audience beyond Chow's original pool of fans.

In addition, *Shaolin Soccer* also represents Stephen Chow's effort to connect himself to one of the most important traditions in Hong Kong cinema, the kung fu action film. Besides its explicit tribute to the kung fu film legend Bruce Lee, the film aligns itself thematically with the genre by placing at the centre of its plot a tension between Chinese tradition and western modernity. The solution that Chow offers to this century-old problem is to bring an ancient tradition up to date by applying it into what is probably the most favourite sport in the modern world. Apart from being a creative variation that Chow introduces into the kung fu genre, this application of kung fu into soccer points to the integration between the old and the

new, and is itself a key motif that recurs throughout the film.³⁷

Stephen Chow's search for transformation, however, does not stop at grounding himself on the cinematic heritage of Hong Kong. In the rest of this chapter, I shall discuss how *Shaolin Soccer*, on the basis of its close association with local popular culture and in its own irreverent manner, engages with some of the most fundamental issues and collective anxieties that have surfaced among the local population in the few years immediately following the sovereignty handover. It is through its subtle interaction with the social milieu that *Shaolin Soccer* becomes a story of Hong Kong people and thereby poses a challenge to the Christian praxis of the expressions of faith in the public arena.

5C. *Shaolin Soccer* as a Story of Hong Kong People and Society

Under the façade of a frivolous comedy which pulls together the appeals of Chinese martial arts, soccer, Japanese manga, and CRPG, *Shaolin Soccer* is in essence a story of the marginalised underdogs struggling for survival in a changing world that is rendering them obsolete. It is true that the story of underdogs is a favourite plot often used by Stephen Chow, and that their final victory at the end of this film has been despised as merely a dream for the masses that is commonplace in popular culture.³⁸ Nonetheless this apparently ordinary story takes on extraordinary meaning for the local audience when the film's original social context is taken

³⁷ This recurring motif of integrating old and new, as embodied in the visual symbol of the shoes will be further discussed in Section 5D.

³⁸ This view is strongly articulated by critic Li Cheuk To in the debate with his peers in the Hong Kong Film Critics Society on whether the Best Film Award should be given to *Shaolin Soccer*. See: transcript of the session in Ng Kwan Yuk, ed., *Hong Kong Film Review 2001* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Critics Society, 2003), 30-66; Li's comment on p.64.

seriously. My contention is that when viewed against its immediate social context of production and distribution, *Shaolin Soccer* can be understood as an irreverent expression of a certain aspect of the mass psychology of the people of Hong Kong in the years subsequent to the city's political reunion with China. Whilst this relationship between the film and the social milieu is not at all overt, it has been brought up in a number of local reviews and audience writings. In particular, these writings correlate the experience of the film characters with the local people's suppressed anxiety of being pushed to the margin and eventually becoming worthless after coming under the sovereignty of an enormous country that is economically thriving. In this section, I shall discuss the narrative of *Shaolin Soccer* with reference to these writings. In spite of their generally unrefined nature, they are revealing as to how the film has been interpreted locally as being a covert expression of the widespread anxiety in the society, and hence regarded as telling the story of the people and their society.

5C.1 *Expressing the Fear of Obsolescence and Marginalisation*

A major aspect of *Shaolin Soccer* which many local critics and audience claim as representing their own stories is the film's portrayal of the major characters' situation of being obsolete and marginalised. In the film the soccer team constitutes a group of 'heroes of the past' who find their spectacular skills obsolete in a modernised city of advanced technology and thriving economy. These characters, including the main protagonist Mighty Steel Leg³⁹ (Stephen Chow) and his martial arts cohort, their soccer coach Fung (Ng Meng Tat), together with Mui the female

³⁹ In the film, the names of the Shaolin characters are never mentioned. They are simply addressed by their unique specialties in martial arts.

taiji master (Zhao Wei), are bound together by their common background and shared destiny. They are all depicted in the film as underdogs who need to struggle for survival in the city as their expertise in martial arts are rendered useless in a world that has changed. As I shall discuss later in this section, the situation of these characters are picked up by some local critics and audience members as covert expressions of their circumstances in real life.

As typical of Stephen Chow's *moleitau* style, the characterisations in *Shaolin Soccer* are comically exaggerated and extreme, without any compromise to subtlety. The marginal status of Mighty Steel Leg is established in visual and diegetic terms during his first entrance into the narrative in the second sequence, especially by the use of starkly contrasting visuals between the character and his surroundings. These include his first shot in which he appears with a shabby look in front of a glamorous shopping mall, where all the other passers-by are dressed in decent trendy costumes, and the immediately following narrative which reveals that he earns his living by collecting refuse for recycling. His distance from urban affluence is visually reinforced in the subsequent transitional shots, which are ground-level close ups of his walking feet in badly worn-out athletic shoes, contrasted with other well-polished leather shoes captured in the same frames. His marginality is further highlighted in two brief incidents in the same sequence, in which he is seen to be bullied by the mall's servitor and then ruthlessly dismissed by a shop manager.

Mighty Leg's marginal identity is more fully established when he is portrayed as totally at home at the dumping ground to sell his collected refuse, and

then at the small roadside kiosk that sells *mantou* (a kind of small bun that originates from northern China). These settings, while being completely different from the shopping mall, bear the visual characteristic of the lower class and retain a touch of the typical semi-rural small towns in contemporary China, and are stylistically compatible with the protagonist's outfit. Even so, Mighty Leg is portrayed as struggling at the very bottom of the society beyond the level of basic subsistence when he is portrayed as being unable to afford a single *mantou* which costs more than his income for the whole day. In the filmmaker's scheme, he is a loser among the losers in the thriving urban economy.

The other major characters in the Shaolin team are also depicted as struggling for basic survival at the margin of the modernised urban world as they share the same background with Mighty Steel Leg. Since they have devoted their entire lives to kung fu training before they re-enter the ordinary world, they lack other skills and can only make their living as unskilled labourers at the lowest level of the society. In the first sequence of their appearance, these former Shaolin monks are presented as living their difficult lives – they are either unemployed, working in lowly jobs, bullied by their bosses, or unable to perform simple job duties. The film presents them as full of resentment as they find their expertise obsolete in the changed situation and utterly useless in real life. This resentment is vividly expressed in their words of reproof toward Mighty Legs' enthusiasm to revive the Shaolin tradition. For example, one of them (Protective Iron Clothes) utters the bitterness of obsolescence when he says, 'Come on, you still talk about my protective iron clothes? What era is this? Computers are everywhere! Jetliners are all over the sky!' Another (Cyclone Legs) articulates the regret of being denied a normal

education, ‘Why were other kids in school but my old man had to take me to learn that rotten Shaolin martial arts, that now I end up washing dishes and toilets for a living?’ Being pushed to the margin of their society, these masters of martial arts even go to the extent of renouncing the heritage they embody and tend to abandon their core identity in exchange for material survival.

The marginal identity of these former monks is shared by two other closely associated major characters, their soccer coach Fung and the female *taiji* master Mui. Fung used to be a top striker in professional football but has for decades been living a life that is poverty stricken and devoid of dignity, as he depends on his villainous former opponent for his livelihood. Mui, being the only major female role in the film, is the only character who is able to apply her martial arts into her job and turns the making of *mantou* into a magnificent display of *taiji* kung fu.⁴⁰ The application of her kung fu to daily life, however, does not save her from the fate of being marginalised. Similar to the Shaolin brothers, she still sweats in a lowly job under a bullying boss.

Because of their similarity in background, these characters are bound together in their shared fate. Whilst in the past they have all reached the pinnacle in their specialised career, in the story they are portrayed as losers in the changed circumstances. These characters find that their original expertise has become useless in the new milieu in which the film is set. In a modernised city where technology dominates, their superb physical capacities have either become derelict due to lack of

⁴⁰ By this arrangement the film lays down an important dramatic preparation for the ending of the story when Mui plays a vital role in the final victory of the Shaolin Team.

practice (as in the case of Cyclone Legs and Fly Above Waters) or are only put to use in physical labour as means to maintain a modest life (as in the case of Invincible Iron Head, Mighty Steel Leg, and Mui). Their common fate is one of displacement by the advancement of the society. Underneath this tragic fate is a deep sense of anxiety that they can have no place in a world which they cannot recognise.

Although the portrayal of these characters is far from being a direct reference to the situation of Hong Kong people, it is significant that the characters' anxiety of displacement is picked up by some of the Hong Kong audience as the latter relate their frustrations over their own circumstances with that of the film characters. My review of the writings by some local film critics and audience members indicates that at the time around the cinema showing of *Shaolin Soccer*, many Hong Kong people were undergoing a time of distress as they lost confidence in the city's future while concomitantly perceiving the progress and tremendous economic growth of China as a threat to their survival.⁴¹ Moreover, these audience members correlate their own experience in reality with the experience of the film characters and echo with the latter. While the Shaolin brothers find themselves obsolete in a changed situation and their expertise in martial arts has no place in the urban economy, these film critics and audience members suggested that many people in Hong Kong were also overwhelmed by China's rapidly growing economic power, and were worried that their professional expertise was being supplanted by the country's own mounting human resource. In other words, there was the anxiety that

⁴¹ Bono Lee, *Hong Kong Postmodern*, 139-142; Wan Tin Sau (尹天仇), 'My View of Shaolin Soccer' (我眼中的少林足球), comment in www.cinema.com.hk forum, 23 August 2001 <http://www.cinema.com.hk/revamp/html/forum/c_forum_detail.php3?TitleID=28240> [accessed 17 March 2006]; Long Tin, 'A Computer Game World'; Tong Ching Siu (湯禎兆), 'An Exemplary Work in Shifting Paradigm' (轉型變陣的示範作), in *Hong Kong Film Review 2001*, 72-76.

they were being driven to the margin by this increasingly prosperous country with which they had recently reunited.

Hence critic Long Tin comments that since *Shaolin Soccer* comes out at a time when the self-image of Hong Kong people has plummeted, the final rebound of the Shaolin Team carries particular weight for the local audience.⁴² He therefore considers this plotline as superior in its meaning to the usual formula of 'the ultimate success of the underdog' in Stephen Chow's previous films, and the symbolic significance of Mighty Leg's worn-out shoes is weightier than that of Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares* used in *The King of Comedy*.⁴³ The attention of one member of the audience goes beyond the narrative and characterisation, and relates the prevalent situation of some Hong Kong people to the whole endeavour of Stephen Chow in this film, including his choice of locating the story outside of Hong Kong and using mainland China as the filming location. This audience member laments that those decisions of Stephen Chow suggest that the city is losing its uniqueness and thus expresses the fear of being replaced – a sentiment which corresponds to the situation of the Shaolin character.⁴⁴

It should be noted that these views expressed by the audience and film critics, which claim to represent the fear and anxiety of many Hong Kong people at

⁴² Long Tin, 'A Computer Game World', 12-15.

⁴³ In *King of Comedy*, the main character Wan Tin Sau (Stephen Chow) is portrayed as always reading the Chinese translation of *An Actor Prepares* by the Russian dramatist Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938). The book is used in that film as a symbol which represents the character's unrelenting perseverance on his road to become a real actor while he remains an extra in the studio.

⁴⁴ Isle's web diary, 24 April 2002 <http://isle.diaryland.com_020424_2.html> [accessed 17 March 2006].

the beginning of the century, are confirmed by the findings of public opinion polls conducted over the same period. Ongoing going polls undertaken since the 1990s reveal that during the summer of 2001 the people's confidence toward their own city had dropped to an unprecedented low since the change of sovereignty, whereas optimism toward the prospect of China was constantly on the rise since late 1997.⁴⁵ In this sense, the film assumes special significance for many among the local audience as it is taken up by the latter as a covert representation of their circumstances.

5C.2 *Manifesting the Tension between the City and its Sovereign Country*

Whilst the characterisation of *Shaolin Soccer* has been claimed by local audiences and critics to be an expression of Hong Kong people's anxiety over the possibility of being marginalised, the underlying tension behind this anxiety is also manifested subtly in the film. It is the latent tension between the city and its sovereign state, which correlates with Hong Kong people's feeling of being threatened by a growing giant. In *Shaolin Soccer*, this anxiety surfaces subtly through its choice of filming locations. Although the film's narrative is intentionally devoid of any explicit geographical reference, audience members who are fairly familiar with the visual characteristics of contemporary China and Hong Kong would easily discern that none of the film's major scenes are shot in Hong Kong. Though

⁴⁵ Polls conducted regularly by the Public Opinion Programme of the University of Hong Kong revealed that except for the first quarter after the sovereignty handover, during which more than 80% of the population expressed confidence in Hong Kong's future, this figure had been on the decrease ever since. In the first half of 2001, slightly more than half of the sampled population was confident; by August that year, the ratio of those who showed confidence dropped to 46% - the lowest since the launch of the polls in 1994. Over the same period approximately 80% of the people were optimistic toward the future of China. For details of the polls, see: Public Opinion Programme, University of Hong Kong: <<http://hkupop.hku.hk>>. For the part on the confidence in Hong Kong's future and the comparison with confidence in China, see especially: <<http://hkupop.hku.hk/english/popexpress/trust/conhkhfuture/combine/chart/chart1.gif>> [accessed 31 March 2006].

the film itself never mentions any locale of the story, all the major sequences are in fact filmed on location in two regions in mainland China. The glamorous commercial centre of Shanghai provides the cosmopolitan visage which is used to create a stark contrast between the city and the Shaolin team, and hence serves to underscore the marginality of the latter. Concomitantly the southern city of Zhuhai, a close neighbour of Hong Kong, is used to represent the rapidly urbanising facet of a semi-rural town, which in the film is the home-base of the team of underdogs. In practical terms, to film in mainland China rather than Hong Kong might be a financial decision for the sake of lower production costs, or a marketing decision for appealing to mainland audiences. Nevertheless, by abstracting the geographical reference of the locations and blending the visual elements of two places together, the filmmakers have essentially constructed a 'condensed version' of contemporary China with its many facets aligned together in a single narrative. The locale of the story is fabricated but the social phenomena portrayed are realistic. It is a place which is at the same time affluent, highly urbanised, and also poverty-stricken and semi-rural.⁴⁶ In other words, despite the ambiguity of the story's whereabouts,⁴⁷ the film has located the entire narrative within the visual context of a rapidly developing China which is simultaneously imagined and real.

Comparable to *Infernal Affairs* discussed in the previous chapter, there is

⁴⁶ Bono Lee (in *Hong Kong Postmodern*, 141) has rightly observed that the locale of the story is a constructed non-existent city; yet he has focused solely on the affluent side and neglected the semi-rural small town characteristic of this imagined space, which is in fact the predominant geographical aspect of the film.

⁴⁷ Stephen Chow maintains that the geographical ambiguity is far from intentional but rather an outcome of technical fault. See Chow's response to the floor in the symposium 'Wandering between the Modern and the Postmodern' (游走於現代後現代之間), 12 October 2004, University of Hong Kong. See: summary of the symposium in Chan Yuen Ying, ed., *I am An Actor*, 157-163; Chow's response on p.163.

also in *Shaolin Soccer* an important rooftop scene which takes a panoramic view of the cityscape as its backdrop. The rooftop scenes in both films function as crucial milestones in the main characters' personal journeys and yet they are set in radically different contexts. In *Infernal Affairs*, the filmmakers use the rooftop sequences to visually position the story as that of Hong Kong and its people by locating the actions within the cinematic embrace of the densely populated residential area of the city. In contrast, the rooftop action in *Shaolin Soccer* is set against the panoramic backdrop of the newly developed financial centre of Shanghai, where the protagonists are unwanted and do not belong. For the casual observer, this view from the roof could simply be any metropolitan centre in the world. Yet for the audience in Hong Kong, this directorial choice can be subliminally disturbing since at the time many Hong Kong people did consider Shanghai as the top competitor of their city. This unease is suggested by some audience writings and reviews. For instance, a review posted in the Hong Kong Film Web describes the affluent facet of Shanghai captured in the film as 'appalling', and says that the widespread apprehension that the city would replace Hong Kong's economic position in the Asia Pacific region is not at all an exaggeration.⁴⁸ Bono Lee describes the Shanghai captured in the film is a 'super Hong Kong', a 'hyper Hong Kong' which is 'more Hong Kong than Hong Kong', but is clearly not Hong Kong.⁴⁹ Taking a slightly different perspective, another review identifies Shanghai as the next location where Hong Kong people should go for further development.⁵⁰ Though this last author

⁴⁸ Ling Lei (伶俐), comment in Hong Kong Film Web, 3 July 2001 <<http://www.hkfilms.com/?http://www.hkfilms.com/Reviews/2001/ShaoLinSoccer.shtml>> [accessed 17 March 2006].

⁴⁹ Bono Lee, *Hong Kong Postmodern*, 141.

⁵⁰ Benny Lee (賓尼), 'Failing Hong Kong, Winning Shanghai' (失敗香港, 勝利上海), in *City Entertainment* 583 (16-29 August 2001), 66.

displays a more positive attitude on the situation by presenting it as an opportunity rather than a threat, this frame of mind nonetheless betrays a tension between Hong Kong and Shanghai, which essentially embodies the phenomenal economic growth of the whole country.

The film's representation of the tension between Hong Kong and the burgeoning China emerges even more sharply when the rooftop scene is considered within the overall narrative context of the whole story. In the film, the rooftop is identified as the place where Mighty Steel Leg lives as a squatter and is also the top of the building in front of which he collects refuse, whereas the scene itself depicts the moment when the Shaolin brothers come together to join hands to form the soccer team. The formation of the soccer team signifies their willingness to reconnect with their own tradition, rekindle their brotherhood, and struggle together for survival in a hostile world. By situating this significant moment within the visual embrace of Shanghai, the film positions the leading city of China as an opponent against which the Shaolin cohorts decide to fight.⁵¹ In this manner, the film betrays an implicit sense of tension between the protagonists and their country, with its rising economic power.

5C.3 Concluding Remarks

Around the time when *Shaolin Soccer* was in the local cinema, the society of Hong Kong was in the midst of economic depression and the people's confidence

⁵¹ The visual character of Shanghai is so dominant in the film that some viewers have mistaken it as the key filming location of the whole film (e.g. Bono Lee, *Hong Kong Postmodern*, 141) and even the locale of the story (e.g. Siu Leung Li, 'The Myth Continues', 53; Benny, 'Failing Hong Kong, Winning Shanghai', in *City Entertainment* 583: 66). In fact only a few scenes are shot in Shanghai and the geographical setting of the story has not been mentioned or implied.

over the prospect of their city was fragile. This was suggested by audience writings and film reviews and confirmed by public opinion polls of the time. Although the anxiety over marginalisation was still a relatively hidden issue in Hong Kong at the time when the film was on screen, the awareness of the issue had already emerged among the people.⁵² Moreover, continued observations on the Hong Kong society reveal that the issue has eventually come to the forefront of the social agenda in subsequent years. For instance, in 2006 when a top level government official publicly called upon all sectors in the society to beware of becoming marginalised in the tide of China's phenomenal development,⁵³ the issue immediately triggered ample discussions in different walks of life. Since then, numerous symposia have been held by various parties and many feature articles have been published in the press that directly address this issue. The level of interest indicates that it is a real concern among many that the city could be losing its edge, and the people losing their places in face of a prosperous China.⁵⁴ In other words, while the issue of marginalisation had not yet fully surfaced during the release of *Shaolin Soccer*, the film nonetheless touched on an unexpressed concern of the people.

⁵² Local scholars have pointed out that the issue of marginalisation began to enter the consciousness of Hong Kong people around the time of the sovereignty handover. See: Li Che-lan (李芝蘭) and Leung Ka-ho (梁嘉豪), 'The Fallacies of Emphasising Difference in the Discussion of Marginalisation' (強調差距的「邊緣化」討論的思想誤區), *Hong Kong Economic Times*, 21 April 2006, A44.

⁵³ 'Hong Kong Should Squarely Confront the Issue of Being Marginalised' (港須正視被邊緣化問題), speech in Chinese by Rafael Hui, Chief Secretary of Administration, Hong Kong SAR Government, at 'The Symposia on the Eleventh Five-Year Plan of China: the Role of Hong Kong', 20 March 2006. Source: On the Record, Information Services Department, Hong Kong SAR Government: <<http://news.gov.hk/tc/category/ontherecord/060320/html/060320tc11001.htm>> [accessed 7 November 2006].

⁵⁴ According to an opinion poll undertaken toward the latter part of 2006 by the media corporation Oriental Press Group, almost 80% of those interviewed were worried that Hong Kong would be superseded by mainland Chinese cities such as Shanghai and Guangzhou within five to ten years. Source: 'Editorial', *Oriental Daily*, 6 November 2006.

By referring to a sample of writings by local audience and critics, I have discussed in this section how *Shaolin Soccer* reflects an important aspect of the prevailing collective mood of its Hong Kong audience through its characterisation and use of cinematographic location. While designing its protagonists as a group of 'heroes of the past' who are being marginalised in a new era of urban economic thrive, the film seizes the hidden fear of its Hong Kong audience and ventilates their anxiety of losing their relative advantage in the changed circumstance of the country with which they have just united. Notwithstanding the film's exaggerated style, local reviews and audience writings indicate that the characters' feeling does find resonance among many of the people. Also, by freely combining the visual elements of two Chinese cities, the film constructs as its setting a Chinese city that is both imagined and real, and which bears the typical traits of contemporary China. As the Shaolin team is depicted as working against the odds in the affluent side of this fabricated city, audiences in Hong Kong perceive it as representation of their tension with the growing economic dominance of mainland China. In such manners, this seemingly *moleitau* film of Stephen Chow is claimed by the local audience as telling a story of their own.

As such, the film's telling of its story of Hong Kong forms a stark contrast with the Christian productions from the same period. In those works discussed in Chapter Three, the prevalent mood of the people and the overall situation of the society are hardly addressed. As expressions of faith, those evangelistic films betray a distance from the people's lives and a general disengagement from the sociocultural context. The manner in which *Shaolin Soccer* is perceived to tell the story of the local people poses a challenge to the approach to the expressions of Christian faith

exemplified in those films.

5D. The Vision of Hope in *Shaolin Soccer*

Because of its portrayal of a group of underdogs that are rendered obsolete in the change of time, and because the timing of its production and release coincided with a difficult time for the society of Hong Kong, *Shaolin Soccer* has been claimed by the local audience and regarded as a covert expression of their collective anxiety. Yet, the film does not stop at merely identifying with the prevalent mood in the society and ventilating the people's discomfort. The filmmaker goes further to articulate his vision of hope, which in the film narrative is presented as the characters' quest for transformation. Though this vision of hope might look unsophisticated and commonplace to some,⁵⁵ some of the audience writings suggest that it does serve to inspire a sense of forward-looking sanguinity among the local audience. Moreover, to criticise the film's message of hope as being simplistic is to overlook its significance and timeliness for the people at that specific social circumstance. As a review in the Hong Kong Movie Database (HKMDB) suggests, the success of the film lies exactly in the simplicity and unity of its message, in particular the emphasis on personal persistence which is especially pertinent to the local audience in the midst of a trying time.⁵⁶

In this section, I shall discuss how the vision of hope in *Shaolin Soccer* is delivered through the characterisation of Mighty Steel Leg and through the core values that the film celebrates. In the course of this discussion, the nature of this

⁵⁵ See footnote 38 under Section 5C.

⁵⁶ Wallace, 13 December 2003, <<http://www.hkmdb.com/column/wallace/wallace-0011.b5.shtml>> [accessed 2 November 2005].

hope and its relevance for Hong Kong people at the beginning of the twenty first century are also examined.

5D.1 *The Protagonist as a Carrier of Hope*

Among the marginalised characters who struggle for survival, the protagonist Mighty Steel Leg is the only one who from the very beginning refuses to give up hope. When his cohorts have given way to a sense of despair and renounce their Shaolin tradition, he persists with his vision to apply Shaolin martial arts into modern life. It is out of this self-appointed sense of mission that he tries to gather his Shaolin brothers into a soccer team, and in the process inspires and leads his peers to embark on a journey in quest of transformation.

While Mighty Steel Leg acts as a carrier of hope in this film, his character is fundamentally different from the Christ-figures identified in many European and North American films.⁵⁷ In contrast to the latter, who are often outsiders that enter a problematic situation and deliver the victimised people from their suffocating circumstances, the protagonist in *Shaolin Soccer* is essentially an insider of the group who shares the same background with the rest. That which sets him apart from the others is his tenaciousness on his mission. He firmly believes in the relevance of Shaolin martial arts for modern life and insists on reinvigorating it, contrary to his peers who accept the status quo as their fate and abandon the hope for any other

⁵⁷ There are plenty of discussions on Christ-figures in European and North American films from a theological perspective; see, for instance: Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (1997) (especially Part 2); Peter Malone, *Movie Christs and Antichrists* (1988). More recently, Deacy has expressed his criticism toward the tendency to over-stretch the Christ-figure; see: Christopher Deacy, 'Reflections on the Uncritical Appropriation of Cinematic Christ-Figures: Holy Other or Wholly Inadequate?', in *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 13 (Summer 2006) <<http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art13-reflectcinematicchrist.html>> [accessed 1 December 2007].

possibilities in life. Also, in contrast to the Christ-figure, the vision of Mighty Steel Leg is not to deliver the cohorts from their entanglement but rather to rejuvenate his tradition, and the former is merely an outcome of the latter. In the process of reinvigorating his Shaolin tradition, he has first and foremost transformed his own fate before those of his brothers.⁵⁸ Thus, rather than regarding Mighty Leg as a Christ-figure, the character is more appropriately aligned with the notion of ‘selfhood as creative transformation’ in New Confucianism prevalent among contemporary Chinese,⁵⁹ as well as the belief in classical Chinese Confucian value that any transformation of the world and the larger society can only begin with the individual.⁶⁰ Henceforth, Mighty Leg is considered not only an insider among the other Shaolin characters in the drama but is also an insider for the Hong Kong audience. Albeit presented irreverently, he is reminiscent of the classical Chinese expectation of a virtuous man who works out his own transformation and consequentially brings improvement to those around.⁶¹

Notwithstanding his being an insider to the group, however, Mighty Leg’s striving toward transforming self and others has met with indifference from his peers

⁵⁸ Whilst the film is explicit in depicting the transformed status of Mighty Steel Leg in the ending scene, the final destiny of the Shaolin brothers is only implied and assumed from the preceding scene which depicts their winning of the national football championship.

⁵⁹ Tu Wei-ming, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985).

⁶⁰ The widely held belief in traditional Chinese Confucianism states that for a virtuous person, the things to be set right should come in this concentric order of priority: oneself (修身 *xiushen*), the family (齊家 *qijia*), the country (治國 *zhiguo*), the world (平天下 *ping tianxia*). A closely related traditional notion is that one has to be a saint in inner life before commanding one’s public life (內聖外王 *nei sheng wai wang*).

⁶¹ I am indebted to the Rev Kin Louie, my postgraduate colleague at the School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh, for reminding me of Mighty Leg’s close resemblance to the Chinese virtuous man.

who regard his enthusiasm as being at odds with reality. This tension between the visionary idealist and the down-to-earth pragmatist is expressed in a crystallised form in a conversation between Mighty Steel Leg and his eldest Shaolin brother, Invincible Iron Head:

Iron Head: I've told you many times that you should be realistic and stop dreaming. There is a job for toilet janitor here; you may want to do it.

Mighty Leg: If a person has no dream, what's the difference from a dried salted fish?

Iron Head: You don't even have a pair of shoes. That's the same with a dried salted fish.

Mighty Leg: No, the fire in my heart will never die out.

Iron Head: (lights a cigarette and blows out lighter) Just one breath and it dies out. See?

Mighty Leg: (grabs the lighter and attempts to light it) It can be rekindled even after dying out!

Iron Head: (grabs back the lighter) Forget it. I have my life, you have your fire. Just leave me alone.

Despite the big brother's discouraging indifference, Mighty Leg refutes this pragmatist suggestion of giving up one's ambition to accept the destiny of a loser. His equating the abandonment of one's own dream with being a dried salted fish is remarkable when understood in the film's original language. For decades in modern Cantonese slang, dried salted fish is often taken as euphemism for dead corpse. Thus by using the analogy Mighty Leg is essentially criticising the pragmatist idea as stripping away a person's very essence of life, which he calls the 'fire in the heart' – referring to the persistence of a person's sense of aspiration. This determination on

the part of Mighty Leg becomes the key factor by which he succeeds in re-organising the Shaolin brothers to form the soccer team, which subsequently serves to revive their sense of hope, and eventually leads to the transformation of their common destiny.

Notably, some members of the audience regard this aspect of the character as a manifestation of Stephen Chow's own outlook on his life and film career, which they consider as hope-inspiring and characterise as being focused, tenacious, and persistent regardless of adversities and unfavourable circumstances.⁶² In these comments there is an underlying implication that Mighty Steel Leg is not only a carrier of hope for the film characters but also for the audience.

Despite his being a carrier of hope and his likeness to the virtuous man, Mighty Steel Leg as a character is nonetheless morally flawed and dramatically flat. Notwithstanding his unabashed proclamation of personal mission from the onset,⁶³ his path toward fulfilling that mission is almost derailed by the temptation of prospective material affluence and personal fame. This is evidenced on the eve of his first match in the national tournament, when he brings Mui to a classy department store, boasts that he is bound to become famous the next day and promises to buy her

⁶² Ar Poon, 'The Martial Arts Spirit of *Shaolin Soccer*' (少林足球的武學精神), 11 July 2001 <www.arnopoon.com/film_essay/shaolinsoccer.php> [accessed 17 March 2006]; Bak Shuen (百璇), 'The Persistence of Stephen Chow' (周星馳的堅持), in *Family Heartware*, 25 October 2004 <<http://www.familyheartware.com/sp.asp?cat=3&cid=117>> [accessed 17 March 2006].

⁶³ When despised by Fung as merely a refuse collector, he emphasises that his real identity is actually a research student who studies how Shaolin kung fu can be ably applied in modern life, whereas collecting refuse is only a front. This is another incident in which Stephen Chow makes fun of the undercover genre, which is a favourite in Hong Kong cinema (discussed in Chapter 3). His previous films, *Fight Back to School* (1991) and *The King of Comedy* (1999) are also comic parodies of the genre.

a gift of her choice. From that point onward in the narrative, the revival of Shaolin is seldom mentioned. Although this mission is eventually accomplished, Mighty Leg's single-mindedness in reinvigorating the Shaolin legacy appears to be tarnished in face of the potential of wealth and reputation. The fact that this character is readily received by many of the Hong Kong audience in spite of moral imperfections points to one of the important features in Stephen Chow's films, namely the acceptance of human weakness, which facilitates the audience's identification with the protagonist and claim of ownership over the story.

5D.2 *The Values Celebrated: The Bases of Hope*

While the character of Mighty Steel Leg is a carrier that brings about hope to the others, the vision of hope in the film is also communicated through the values it celebrates. Within the narrative structure, the film portrays certain values as essential for the characters to live through the turbulence and achieve what they struggle for, and thus function as the basis of hope for them. These include personal persistence and determination as well as solidarity of the common people.

5D.2.1 Persistence and Determination – the ‘fire in the heart’

The notion of ‘fire in the heart’, which Mighty Steel Leg stresses in his conversation with Iron Head, is emblematic of a key message in *Shaolin Soccer* which points to the primary importance of personal persistence. Though only verbally mentioned once in the whole story, it is a recurring visual motif which emerges several times throughout the film in the form of CGI. Whenever the narrative involves the rekindling of personal passion, the fire imagery literally intrudes into the natural flow of realistic images in a style that is reminiscent of

Japanese manga and Hong Kong action comics. Specifically there are three key moments in the first half of the film in which this visual motif appears. The first of these is the initial encounter between Mighty Led and Fung, when the background of the former immediately turns aflame as he articulates his Shaolin passion. In dramatic terms this incident serves to establish the protagonist's motivation and thereby sets up the premise of the whole film. The second moment is the roadside dancing scene in front of the small *mantou* shop,⁶⁴ and the third one is the friendly match that turns into violent foul play, which is the major turning point in the narrative. These two subsequent scenes reinforce the established premise as they embody the central message, the characteristics as well as the core values of the whole film.

Under the façade of nonsensical style that is typical of Stephen Chow, the roadside dancing scene encapsulates the essential message of the film through a lively and unrestrained illustration of the 'fire in the heart' motif. The portrayal of the imagery begins with Mighty Leg suddenly singing to Mui in front of the *mantou* shop, continues with the young man enthusiastically singing the melody he composes, and carries on with the butcher who starts dancing on the spot. One by one, passers-by are enthused and their eyes are literally lit up with fire. In no time the scene turns into a spectacle of street dancing which involves more than a dozen people from different backgrounds. It is the first and major instance in *Shaolin Soccer* which celebrates the bold expression of personal passion and its contagious nature. The audacious expression of the singing young man and the others in this

⁶⁴ This scene was not included in the original release of the film but was soon added into an 'extended edition' when the film was already in the cinema for several weeks. In the DVD released in Hong Kong, the scene is also offered as an optional 'extended edition'.

scene echoes the persistent effort of Mighty Steel Leg in getting his Shaolin brothers on board to rejuvenate their tradition. In other words, the fire in the eyes of the roadside dancers acts as a reinforcement of the fire in the heart of Mighty Steel Leg.

Subsequently the imagery of fire in the heart culminates in the most crucial turning point of the film, which portrays the Shaolin brothers' revitalisation in spirit during their first football match with an infamous team that is notorious for foul play. When the opponent's extremely insulting behaviour pushes the dignity of the Shaolin brothers to the verge of total destruction, they are seen to be suddenly lit up with fire and begin manipulating the football with their mastery in martial arts. Through this experience the characters are transformed from a group of ex-masters of martial arts who have long forgotten their kung fu and know little about football into a team that exhibits unmatched mastery of the ball. It is the point at which the Shaolin Team truly takes shape and the cohorts' transformation becomes possible. When the scene is singled out and viewed on its own, the extremely insulting experience of the Shaolin brothers might be mistaken as the cause behind their revival.⁶⁵ Yet, when considered within the preceding narrative context it becomes clear that the incident is merely an immediate incentive. The more substantial motivating force behind their transformation is Mighty Leg's uncompromising fire in the heart, which ignites the fire in the hearts of all the Shaolin brothers.

In this way, through the use of the fire in the heart imagery, the roadside

⁶⁵ Primarily on the basis of this scene, the film's message has been criticised as being problematic because it depicts self-discipline as a result of masochism and dehumanisation – meaning that the revival of the Shaolin brothers is deemed a consequence of the extreme humiliation and violence they go through. Such a view is expressed by Bryan Chang (張偉雄) <http://www.mov3.com/critics/shaoglin_soccer/index.html> [accessed 17 March 2006].

dancing scene and the violent friendly match scene celebrate a core value in the story, namely the persistence in what one believes and the determination to put that belief into practicable actions.⁶⁶

5D.2.2 Solidarity of the Common People

In addition to celebrating the values of persistence and determination, another important value underpinned by the film is solidarity among the common people. This message is communicated mainly through visual emphases on the contagiousness of the fire in the heart among the roadside dancers as well as the Shaolin brothers.

In the street dancing scene, both the plot and the *mise-en-scene* exhibit an unabashed bias toward the common folk. To this end, the film introduces the owner of the *mantou* shop as the other who poses a threat to the street dancers. In its narrative arrangement, this scene of hilarious action, together with the personal passion and energy it represents, is cut short by the sudden intrusion of the shop owner who calls the whole action insane. Audio-visually, the festive mood of the dancing is abruptly terminated with her scream and, in fast motion, all the dancers return to their original routine as if nothing has happened. The shop owner is thus depicted as a threat to the fire in the heart of these common folks, who are visually extolled in the scene as being courageous, spontaneous, and mutually supportive of

⁶⁶ Critic Tong Ching Siu's understanding of the film's message as 'anything is possible as long as you believe' is only a partial interpretation which overlooks the overall scheme of the plot (Tong, 'An Exemplary Work in Shifting Paradigm', 72-76). Rather than being merely a subjective wishful thinking, as Tong implies, the persistence of Mighty Leg is grounded in the constructed reality within the film's narrative universe, which is the fact that the Shaolin cohort's mastery of kung fu, though rusty, is nonetheless true mastery of a true skill and not a product of Mighty Leg's imagination.

one another. By portraying the shop owner as the threatening other, the film infers an underlying rapport among the grassroots.

In the friendly match scene, the celebration of this grassroots solidarity is presented with a different emphasis. After the Shaolin brothers' spiritual revival, they immediately play like a seamless dream team and overcome the opponent's treachery without any difficulty. More significantly, the scene depicts the opponents coming back after their defeat to ask to join the Shaolin Team. In one sense this arrangement in the story is primarily pragmatic, since there are only six Shaolin brothers and they need extra members to form a full team. By so doing, however, the film also implicitly points to a form of solidarity that transcends the barrier between these opponents. Unlike the *mantou* shop owner, the opposing team is not depicted as the other but shares the same socio-economic background with the Shaolin team.

In its audiovisual style, both the roadside dancing and the friendly match scenes betray an unrefined directness that is associated with the unsophisticated aesthetics of the grassroots. This unpolished nature is particularly palpable in the spontaneous singing of the young man who shares his melody, and also in the dancing of the butcher and the others. Although the roadside dance eventually develops into a well choreographed spectacle within just a few shots, the candour of the mass is maintained. In the foul play match, the humiliation that the Shaolin brothers undergo is presented in a vulgar manner, and yet it resonates with some of the most unbearable hardships of the lower class in real life.⁶⁷ This intentional

⁶⁷ Tong Ching Siu even comments that the experience of the Shaolin brothers in this scene not only mirrors the general condition of Hong Kong but is an indirect depiction of the tough situation of those in the film industry ('An Exemplary Work in Shifting Paradigm', 72).

vulgarity betrays the film's bias toward the commoners, and is in fact evidenced throughout the whole film and is consistent with the rest of Stephen Chow's films. In the case of *Shaolin Soccer*, then, as in his previous films, the genre is the carrier of the yearnings of the grassroots.⁶⁸

5D.3 *The Nature of Hope: Double Revitalisation of the Material and the Spiritual*

While the core values in *Shaolin Soccer* are mainly manifested through the motif of fire in the heart, the nature of hope in the film is embodied in two narrative elements – the football team and the motif of the shoes. For the Shaolin characters, the formation of the team represents a double revitalisation that comprises the intangible revival of their spiritual heritage and the tangible improvement in material life. On the part of the protagonist Mighty Leg, it realises his personal vision to reinvigorate the Shaolin tradition while concomitantly leading to the transformation of his socio-economic status. It is therefore a concrete step toward re-establishing the cohorts' identities in the society from which they have been marginalised.

This narrative of double revitalisation, including the tension between its spiritual and material dimensions, is symbolically encapsulated in the shoes motif.⁶⁹ Specifically, Mighty Steel Leg's embrace of the old tradition is symbolised by his

⁶⁸ Esther Cheung 'Falling for Master Sing and the Master of the Fox Cave', 12.

⁶⁹ Although the consistent and frequent reference to the shoes motif throughout the whole narrative indicates the thematic centrality of this double aspiration in the film, it is generally overlooked by local audience and critics. Among the reviews and audience writings that I have consulted, only two have briefly touched on the shoes motif. They include the review by Wallace in HKMDB <<http://www.hkmdb.com/column/wallace/wallace-0011.b5.shtml>> [accessed 2 November 2005], and Tsang Wing Han's review on the website of the Catholic Diocesan Audio Visual Centre <<http://www.hkdavc.com/movie/v2-movie-0107-1.html>> [accessed on 17 March 2006].

attachment toward the old worn out shoes, whilst his aspiration for a better material life is represented in his longing for a better pair. The tension between the two sides of his aspiration comes to the surface when at one point Mighty Leg exhibits the inclination to put aside his mission of reviving the old tradition for the pursuit of new possibilities in material gain. Referring to his shoes, he says to Mui, 'We have to be forward-looking; when the old ones are worn out they need to be replaced.' This total embrace of the new to the exclusion of the old, however, is not the vision of the filmmaker. Instead, the film presents as its vision of hope a resolution that incorporates new elements to revitalise the old. This is symbolised by Mighty Leg's old shoes being mended by Mui with a new surface and sole, and presented back to him when his new shoes are torn apart in the final match. Notably, it is with the repaired old shoes that he plays the last part of the match and perseveres till the final victory is won.

This symbol which embodies the integration of the old and the new is then brought forward into the film's final scene, which cinematically connects the symbol with the outcome of this old-new integration by using a single long-take as its main establishment shot. The shot begins with a close up of Mighty Leg jogging in his repaired shoes, and ends with a crane-up to a huge outdoor advertisement of *Time* magazine which shows Mighty Leg and Mui as the cover image with the caption that reads 'Kung Fu Couple Wins World Bowling Champion'.⁷⁰ In between the two ends

⁷⁰ This ending of the film, which suggests that Mighty Leg has moved to a different social class, has been criticised as Stephen Chow's surrender to the rule of game of capitalism (See: Isle's web diary, 24 April 2002 <http://isle.diaryland.com_020424_2.html> [accessed 17 March 2006]). This criticism, however, is oblivious to the interrelatedness between the film and its socio-economic context, especially the desperate need for hope on the part of Hong Kong people to get out of the entanglement of economic depression. Also, the criticism by critic Athena Tsui (馮若芷) that the film's portrayal of the struggle of the Shaolin cohorts against the odds promotes class hatred and retaliation is unfounded. (See: proceedings of the judging committee for the Hong Kong Film Critics Society Award, in *Hong Kong Film Review 2001*, 62-63). The most prominent

of this long-take, the scene shows the dream of Mighty Leg being realised – Shaolin martial arts is seen to be applied to different aspects of ordinary city life. Therefore, this scene is simultaneously a depiction of Mighty Leg’s mission being accomplished and a visual reinforcement of the film’s vision of hope, which advocates the incorporation of new elements to rejuvenate old tradition.

As the film proposes the revitalisation of old tradition with new elements as the resolution, a defining feature of this vision of hope is its unity of the spiritual and material dimension rather than the dichotomy of the two. In the story, the transformation of socio-economic identity is portrayed as both the consequence and the cause of the rejuvenation of spiritual tradition. Essentially the film presents the tangible and the intangible dimensions as mutually complementary in the human quest for hope. Hence, the vision of hope manifested in *Shaolin Soccer* is concerned with concrete situations with which the people are struggling and not preoccupied with solely spiritual or otherworldly matters. This outlook of the film confronts Hong Kong Christians regarding their expressions of faith in public, which often focus on visions of hope that are beyond the touch of the common people in their daily lives.⁷¹ As C.S. Song has emphasised in his discussion of hope in the Asian context, ‘For hope to be hope, it has to address the present as well as the future, perhaps the present more than the future. For hope to be hope, it has to be “contemporary” as well as “proleptic”, perhaps more contemporary than proleptic.’⁷²

characteristic of Shaolin Team’s opponent is not the difference in socio-economic status but the atrocity of the team manager. The Shaolin brothers in the story are fighting for their own survival in the society rather than against any specific class or interest group.

⁷¹ See my discussion in Chapter 3.

⁷² C.S. Song, *The Believing Heart: An Invitation to Story Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 163.

There is little doubt that the vision of hope in *Shaolin Soccer* does ‘address the present’ and is ‘contemporary’. In this sense, the film can be regarded as successful in engaging with the people in their prevailing situation. Nonetheless, it should also be noted that despite the film’s endeavour to address the present, it does not offer a long term view of the future, not to mention an eschatological dimension in any sense. Its vision of hope, no matter how appealing it may be, is solely focused on the here and now; what it offers is one step outside the entanglement of the present circumstances, without anything beyond.

5D.4 Concluding Remarks

In this section I have examined how the notion of hope is represented in *Shaolin Soccer*. For the characters in the film this is a central concern as they are marginalised from the mainstream of the society and can see little hope in their struggle for a living. Primarily the whole storyline of the film is itself a narrative of hope which depicts the underdogs’ reversal of ill-fate. Within the framework of this storyline, the protagonist Mighty Steel Leg is characterised as a carrier of hope whose contagious fire in the heart reinvigorates the fire in the hearts of his Shaolin brothers. By using the fire in the heart as a recurring motif, the film celebrates the values of persistence and determination as well as the solidarity of the common people, and by doing so upholds them as the keys to the realisation of hope. This solidarity is not confined within the diegetic boundary since the film exhibits through its cinematic style a close affinity with the unrefined, unsophisticated, and at times even vulgar, which are usually associated with the grassroots. On the basis of persistence and solidarity, the story builds toward the formation of the Shaolin Soccer Team, which embodies the realisation of hope for all characters involved.

The team is Mighty Leg's channel to actualise his vision of reviving the Shaolin tradition in the modern world and is also everyone's path to the transformation of ill-fate. Thus in a simple yet remarkable way, a double revitalisation of both the spiritual and the material is achieved whereas a dichotomisation between the two realms has been avoided.

More importantly, however, this narrative of hope is not only applicable to the film's characters. Considered alongside the film's dramatic representation of the collective anxiety of some Hong Kong people (section 5C), it can be regarded as a vision of hope that the filmmaker offers to the local audience. Additionally, it should be noted that the story of Mighty Steel Leg has been regarded as autobiographical of Stephen Chow. As pointed out earlier (section 5B), Chow was going through one of his lowest times in his filmmaking career at the time. As a consequence of the commercial setback of *King of Comedy*, he experienced a difficult period in raising the production capital for *Shaolin Soccer*.⁷³ Chow himself admitted that *King of Comedy* was more important to him than *Shaolin Soccer*, because, he said, without the failure of the former there would be no success of the latter, which was essentially saying the same thing as the previous film with an improved packaging.⁷⁴ Like the Shaolin brothers, Chow used to be at the top of his world but was suddenly confronted with the fear of having fallen from grace. His personal experience is thus seen as corresponding to that of the film's characters, and the latter's quest for hope and transformation also mirrors his own strivings. As critic Tong Ching Siu puts it,

⁷³ See the final paragraph in section 5B.1.

⁷⁴ Symposium on 'Growing up Between Modernity and Postmodernity' (成長於現代與後現代之間), 22 October 2004, Shantou University, China. Transcript in *I am an Actor*, 115-129.

Chow has made use of his own experience to demonstrate to Hong Kong people that one can regain one's foothold after falling down; as long as one does not give up and believes in one's own ability, there will be a time of 'coming back' as in the case of the Shaolin brothers.⁷⁵ In this manner, the experience of the filmmaker himself is received as a real-life illustration of the vision of hope that he articulates in the film.

5E. Conclusion: the Relevance of *Shaolin Soccer* for the Expressions of Christian Faith in Public

Within the overall analytical framework of my study, in this chapter I have undertaken a textual and contextual discussion on *Shaolin Soccer*. In addition to looking at the film's significance in the popular culture of Hong Kong, I have scrutinised its various diegetic and non-diegetic elements against its immediate social context in 2001, including the plot, the characterisation, the style of audiovisual treatment, as well as the use of filming locations. In its narrative form *Shaolin Soccer* employs a range of ingredients that appeal to the local audience, including many of the success factors in previous Stephen Chow films that have made him the icon of Hong Kong popular culture. These include Chow's typical *moleitau* style and his favourite plot of the final victory of the underdog. Additionally Chow also makes use of other popular cultural elements such as Japanese manga-anime and computer role-playing game. The most significant creative decision in this respect, however, is to make *Shaolin Soccer* a kung fu action film. By locating itself within this genre, the film is essentially claiming to be an heir to a very important heritage in Hong Kong cinema. Through these, the film builds rapport with the popular cultural sensibilities of the common people in its own place of origin. Moreover, my

⁷⁵ Tong Ching Siu, 'An Exemplary Work in Shifting Paradigm', 76.

review of a sample of writings by local critics and audience members shows that the film has been claimed and owned by many in Hong Kong to be a story that represents their situation at the time. As Stephen Chow himself recognises, *Shaolin Soccer* thrives in the market primarily because it has captured the prevalent mood of Hong Kong people of the day, and also because it has effectively synergised the three favourite elements readily received by the local audience – action, positive encouragement, and comedy.⁷⁶

Regardless of the film's achievement, however, certain aspects of its aesthetic approach and moral vision are to be critiqued from a Christian theological perspective, particularly its obsession with violence and its inadequate vision of hope. While a number of local critics have criticised the excessive violence of many CGI-enhanced action scenes,⁷⁷ it is however not only the explicit portrayal of violence on screen that is problematic. Even more problematic is the film's tendency to resort to violence casually – even as a means of entertainment. This is evidenced in the karaoke performance scene in which the brutal beating of the protagonist and his big brother is treated as comical. Concomitantly, violence is also depicted as an effective means to resolve problems, and violent acts from the other are only to be overcome by stronger violence. This belief in violence is evidenced in the two major football matches covered in the whole film – the friendly match and the final. In both scenes, the opponents of the Shaolin are physically crushed, and at the end of

⁷⁶ Quoted in Bono Lee, 'Self-strengthening against Adversities and its Variations: the Symphony of Hong Kong Cinema 2001' (「逆境自強」及其變奏：2001 年香港電影交響曲), in *Hong Kong Panorama 2001-2002*, 10-12.

⁷⁷ For example: Wong Fen and Bono Lee <<http://www.filmcritics.org.hk/index.php?mod=iZine&cmd=showCAS&caID=123>> [accessed 17 March 2006]; Long Tin, 'A Computer Game World'.

the final there are apparently serious injuries. To borrow Mitchell's words, in doing so the film is 'presenting, commodifying and trivialising' violence.⁷⁸ Ironically, this treatment of violence undermines what Mighty Leg articulates at his first appearance to be the essence of Shaolin martial arts – that it is practised for the sake of physical improvement and not for fighting.

Besides, although the film presents a vision of hope that takes the present seriously and alleviates the characters from their miseries in the here and now, this vision of hope also suffers from the lack of the view of the ultimate. As mentioned in the previous section (5D.3), while the vision of hope presented in *Shaolin Soccer* is to be celebrated for its organic unity of the spiritual and the material, it is also to be critiqued for its lack of any long view beyond the immediate. In fact, even the spiritual dimension in this vision is only concerned with the spiritual identity, or religious affiliation, in the present and there is no mention of any spiritual dimension in the transcendent sense. From a Christian theological standpoint which emphasises the eschatological dimension of hope, this is deemed inadequate.⁷⁹ On the contrary, popular expressions of Christian hope as represented in the local Christian films are often characterised by otherworldly escapism and individualistic spirituality, and lacks implications for life in the present life. The challenge for Christian expression of faith in this respect is then to maintain a balanced view which does not lose sight of either the ultimate or the penultimate.

⁷⁸ Jolyon Mitchell, *Media Violence and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 10.

⁷⁹ For example, Moltmann's theology of hope is found on his eschatological conviction and the future of Christ. Even for C.S. Song who emphasises the 'ethics of hope' rather than 'theology of hope', there is nonetheless a divine-transcendent dimension. See: C.S. Song, 'The Ethics of Hope', in *The Believing Heart*, 162-187.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, there are three important features of *Shaolin Soccer* that can serve as challenges or reminders to the Christian praxis of the expressions of faith in public. First and foremost, the film is in touch with the pulse of the society and addresses issues that concern the people in their real lives. In a manner comparable to but dissimilar from *Infernal Affairs*, the experience of the major Shaolin characters echoes with the ‘structure of feelings’ of many people in Hong Kong. As I have discovered from an analysis of some of the audience writings and critical reviews, the angst of the characters, their agony of being rendered obsolete and their sense of insecurity of becoming worthless in China’s thriving economy do find resonance among the film’s primary audience in Hong Kong. Despite its seemingly nonsensical narrative style and its relatively simplistic characterisation, the film has remarkably engaged with the prevalent mood that dominated the society at large. As such it touches on one of the deepest anxieties of the people – namely the insecurity over their own worth and dignity. As a mainstream commercial film, these endeavours form a sharp contrast with the Christian productions examined in Chapter Three, which often exhibit the lack of connectedness with their own sociocultural context. This is a failure to contextualise their expressions of faith which deserves to be confronted by the attempt of *Shaolin Soccer*.

Moreover, in the course of addressing the anxiety of the people, the film betrays a basic stance that identifies with the underdog. As discussed earlier (5D.2.2), one of the core values that the film celebrates, as expressed both in the plot and the mise-en-scène of certain scenes, is the solidarity of the common people. This

orientation which regards the common people as subjects instead of the other serves as a reminder to Christian praxis that God as portrayed in the Bible is biased toward the poor, the outcast, and the marginalised⁸⁰ – in short, those who are ripped of their footholds in the community, just like the Shaolin brothers in the film.

Closely related to its identification with the underdog, the film also exhibits an acceptance of human weakness. As pointed out above (5D.1), despite his role in the story as the carrier of hope, and despite the fact that he displays some common features of the classical Chinese notion of a virtuous man, the protagonist Mighty Steel Leg is in fact a weak and flawed character. Likewise, the other major characters in the Shaolin team are also normal flawed persons who exhibit qualities that are usually considered unfavourable – greed, lust, aggression, vulgarity, and the like. Throughout the whole narrative, the film does not pass explicit value judgements on any of them but instead displays a sense of acceptance toward these flawed individuals. This characteristic of the film forms a contrast with the local Christian productions, in which the protagonists are often shown to be morally superior albeit having some minor shortcomings and occasional failures. There seems to be an underlying lack of acceptance toward the dark side of human nature. In this regard, *Shaolin Soccer* is then a reminder of the reality of human weaknesses or sinfulness to be taken seriously.

To sum up, *Shaolin Soccer* interrogates Christian expressions of faith by telling its version of a local story that is in touch with the sensibility and collective

⁸⁰ See, for example, Amos (especially 2.6-7), Mary's Magnificat in Luke 1.46-55, and Luke 4.18-19 in which Jesus was depicted as quoting Isaiah 61, among numerous other Biblical passages that point toward God's special concern for the poor and the oppressed.

mood in the society, by identifying with the marginalised, and also by displaying an acceptance of human weaknesses. At the same time, though, the film's reliance on violence and the deficiency in its vision of hope are not to be overlooked.

Chapter Six

Finding Hope in Memory of the Past: *Kung Fu Hustle*¹

6A. Introduction

In this chapter, I continue the study of contemporary Hong Kong cinema with *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004) with the purpose of identifying the insights and challenges that it may offer to expressions of faith by local Christians in the public realm. Along the same line as previous chapters on the *Infernal Affairs Trilogy* (Chapter Four) and *Shaolin Soccer* (Chapter Five), the analysis of *Kung Fu Hustle* is undertaken by performing a close examination of the film text against its immediate socio-cultural context, supported by an analytical review of representative written comments by local audience and critics.

The film is set in an imaginary locale during a chaotic era when the society is dominated by the iniquitous Axe Gang, while only the grassroots community in Pig Sty Alley at the margin of the city is left undisturbed.² This peacefulness is broken when the protagonist,³ a skilful pickpocket who is determined to join the gang and be

¹ *Kung Fu Hustle* (功夫), directed by Stephen Chow, 2004.

² The film is intentionally ambiguous in its temporal-spatial reference although the urban scene bears visual characteristics of Shanghai in the 1940s, and the Pig Sty Alley is a set constructed near Shanghai. It is a misnomer when Kin-Yan Szeto states that the story is set in Shanghai in the 1940s in her article 'The Politics of Historiography in Stephen Chow's *Kung Fu Hustle*', *Jump Cut* 49 (Spring 2007) <<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc49.2007/Szeto/index.html>> [accessed 1 December 2007].

³ He and several other characters are unnamed in the final form of the film, although he is addressed as 'Sing' in the credit list and promotion materials. Apparently it is the name used in the script. For the sake of faithfulness to the final form of the film, he will be addressed as 'the protagonist' in this thesis.

a bad guy, accidentally ushers in an encounter between the gang and the alley community. This entails a series of confrontations and the surfacing of hidden martial arts masters. Finally the protagonist rediscovers his own identity as the ultimate hero to beat the evil one and brings peaceful order to the society.

Kung Fu Hustle is the first film from the same director (Stephen Chow) since *Shaolin Soccer*, and has broken the latter's box office record to become the top grossing local film in Hong Kong to date.⁴ Even so, as I shall point out later in the next section, some among the local audience have been suspicious toward the film and its director as they consider him to be appealing to the foreign audience at the expense of local viewers. However, my scrutiny of the film, supported by my review of writings from audience and critics, has led to me to conclude otherwise. The central contention of this chapter is that Stephen Chow is, in this film, reconnecting himself and the audience to an important part of the local collective memory which is inherent in the city's popular culture but is often overlooked. This reconnection with the past is claimed by some local reviews and is re-presented as a vision of hope for Hong Kong society. Under this premise, I proceed first of all to discuss the film's significant position in the cinema and popular culture of Hong Kong. Then the film's significance as a story of Hong Kong people as well as the vision of hope that it spells out are examined. Finally the film's relevance for popular expressions of faith in the public arena is to be discussed in the conclusion.

⁴ Details of its release and box office record will be discussed in section 5B.

6B. The Significance of *Kung Fu Hustle* in Hong Kong Cinema and Popular Culture

In the preceding chapter on *Shaolin Soccer*, I pointed out that before the release of that film the local audience and film industry were quite ambivalent about its potential in the market.⁵ The circumstance of *Kung Fu Hustle*, however, was different. When it was launched in the Christmas season of 2004, some of the local news media expressed keen interest in the film. There was plenty of related news coverage and even speculation over its box office income, thereby creating the impression that many people were concerned about this film.⁶ This excitement was not confined to the media and entertainment industry. Most notably, a public forum was organised by the University of Hong Kong in October that year, in which Stephen Chow was invited to a conversation with Leo Ou-fan Lee, a world-renowned scholar of modern Chinese Literature and cultural studies.⁷ This occasion marked the first time that Chow formally entered the agenda of the local academic circle after being an icon of Hong Kong popular culture for more than a decade. The event not

⁵ See Chapter 5 section B.

⁶ For example, on Christmas Eve, which was the second day of the film's screening, *Mingpao Daily News* devoted a full page in its entertainment section to report on the film's first day in cinemas, and compared its opening box office with a number of other local blockbusters including *Shaolin Soccer* and *Infernal Affairs II*.

⁷ 'Wandering between Modernity and Postmodernity: a Conversation between Leo Lee and Stephen Chow' (游走於現代與後現代之間), University of Hong Kong, 12 October 2004. Transcript of the forum was published in *Yazhou Zhoukan* 18.43 (31 October 2004). This is the first of a series of similar forums held over subsequent months in several institutions in China, including Shantou University (Shantou, 22 October), Jiaotong University (Shanghai, 1 December), Southwestern Ethnic University (Chengdu, 5 December), and the People's University of China (Beijing, 14 December).

only captured the attention of the intellectuals but also ignited the interests of the news media and was widely covered in the local press. The weekly newsmagazine *Yazhou Zhoukan* (formerly *Asiaweek Chinese Edition*), which was published in Hong Kong but widely circulated in various Chinese communities worldwide, even featured a cover story of Stephen Chow in a subsequent issue.⁸

While this intensity in media attention toward the film and the filmmaker should be understood as the outcome of sophisticated marketing, it should be noted that some other factors are at work that contributed to the phenomenon. First there was the extraordinary commercial success of *Shaolin Soccer*, and *Kung Fu Hustle* was Chow's first film in more than three years. Second, it was the only local production that was scheduled for the Christmas slot, which was a phenomenon that was unheard of for decades. It was thus understandable that audience and media attentions were focused on this film. Third, *Kung Fu Hustle* was the first film of Chow that was funded by investors outside of Hong Kong, including Columbia Pictures (Asia) and the China Film Group. As I shall discuss further in due course, these non-local investments were regarded with considerable scepticism among some of the Hong Kong audience who opined that Chow had in this film betrayed his local roots for the sake of 'international' appeal. Yet there were others who considered the film a test case of whether the filmmaker had the potential to reach a wider audience

⁸ *Yazhou Zhoukan* 18.42 (24 October 2004).

beyond his local and East Asian appeal, after the relatively unsuccessful experience of *Shaolin Soccer* in overseas distribution.⁹

As it turned out, the box office performance of *Kung Fu Hustle* did not disappoint Chow's investors and fans. It became the top grossing film of the year in just five days of theatrical release by making HKD thirty million in ticket sales. Eventually in the following three weeks it grossed a total of more than HKD sixty million and became the top grossing local film in the history of Hong Kong, replacing the record set by *Shaolin Soccer* three years earlier. In addition to this huge commercial success, critical acclaim for *Kung Fu Hustle* was also considerable. It was honoured in a number of film festivals in Hong Kong,¹⁰ Taiwan,¹¹ and elsewhere.¹² Nominations outside of East Asia suggested that Stephen Chow as a filmmaker had made his first mark in being recognised by an audience beyond the Chinese and East Asian region. Yet, despite the overwhelming commercial success and achievements in film awards, local audience response and critics' reviews were not unanimously positive. The question at the core of the negative responses was whether *Kung Fu Hustle* represented the filmmaker's betrayal of his local support and hence an abnegation of his status as the icon in Hong Kong popular culture. In the

⁹ Miramax (USA) bought the international distribution rights of *Shaolin Soccer* but kept it on the shelf until a limited release on 2 April, 2003, long after the film was widely circulated through pirate copies and internet downloads.

¹⁰ It won several awards including Best Film at the Hong Kong Film Awards 2005, and was also listed as a Film of Merit at the Hong Kong Film Critics Society Awards, 2005.

¹¹ Best Film, Best Director, Golden Horse Award, 2005.

¹² It was nominated for the Best Film Not in English Language, BAFTA (UK), and for Best Foreign Language Film in Golden Globes (USA), among several other nominations elsewhere.

following discussion, I shall focus on exploring two specific issues related to this controversy. First, whether this controversy surrounding *Kung Fu Hustle* has undermined Stephen Chow's iconic stature; second, how the local audience and critics have positioned this film within the long standing tradition of Hong Kong action cinema. These issues are important because they are closely connected to the film's position in local popular culture. They beg the question of whether *Kung Fu Hustle* can be legitimately regarded as a story of contemporary Hong Kong, and thereby, in the framework of this thesis, whether insights and challenges derived from the film can be pertinent to expressions of faith by local Christians in public.

6B.1 *The Questioning and Reaffirmation of Stephen Chow's Iconic Status*

As discussed in the previous chapter, Stephen Chow has not only been the top grossing screen actor in Hong Kong throughout the 1990s but also widely recognised as an icon in local popular culture since then.¹³ Ironically, although *Kung Fu Hustle* proves to be his most commercially successful project to date, his iconic status has been called into question with the release of the film. A number of audience members express grave disappointment and make criticisms that the filmmaker is repeating himself and has come to a dead end in creativity. They appear to be Stephen Chow's long time fans whose main complaints target the weakness in the film's comic aspect. For instance, one of them comments that 'for those of us who have grown up with watching *Shuttle 430*, reusing such old tricks cannot make

¹³ For my discussion on this, see: Chapter 4 section B1.

us satisfied'.¹⁴ Another audience member concurs that the main weakness of the film is its repetition of Chow's jokes, and opines that the film's focus on action has resulted in its lack of memorable taglines which have always been characteristic of Chow's films. This person laments that Chow is using action to cover up his lack of creativity and also to appeal to the foreign audience.¹⁵ Still another says that '*Kung Fu Hustle* is better than nothing', and is disappointed that the film lacks the original flavour of Chow's previous works.¹⁶ These views which focus on the inadequacy of the film as a comedy have resonated among some of the critics. For example, one commentator describes the film as 'disappointing' and regards *Shaolin Soccer* as more creative and meaningful in its message.¹⁷ Another critic calls the film a 'collection' of Chow's old films and other popular elements from Hong Kong films of the past, and comments that, as a result of the comic aspect being toned down, it becomes just as an ordinary work of CGI.¹⁸ A young scholar of cultural studies even states sarcastically that a major theme of the film is 'recycle', as he regards it as a superficial array of recycled elements from old Hong Kong films without further

¹⁴ Alan Lin's Random Thoughts, 23 December 2004 <<http://alan.lin.name/archives/2004/12/23/kung-fu-hustle>> [accessed 17 March 2006]; *Shuttle 430* was the children's television programme with which Stephen Chow began his acting career in the early 1980s. See also my discussion of Chow's early career in Chapter 5 section B1.

¹⁵ Sunfai, 'Farewell, the Stephen Chow of Hong Kong' (別了, 香港的周星馳), 4 January 2005 <<http://sunfai.blogspot.com/2005/01/blog-post.html>> [accessed 30 March 2006].

¹⁶ Ah Yeh (阿野), '*Kung Fu Hustle* is Better than Nothing' (功夫聊勝於無), 5 January 2005 <http://www.inmediahk.net/public/article?item_id=7354&group_id=19> [accessed 17 February 2007].

¹⁷ Chan Ka-ming (陳嘉銘), 'Fireless People, Overly Sentimental Hong Kong' (平民有火, 香港濫情) (n.d.) <http://www.filmcritics.org.hk/big5/?mod=articles&task=show_item&cat_id=0071&item_id=00000142> [accessed 17 March 2006].

¹⁸ Duckling, 'Kung Fu Hustle – a Stephen Chow Collection' (功夫一集周星馳大成), 6 January 2005 <<http://www.hkmdb.com/column/duckling/duckling-0006.b5.shtml>> [accessed 2 November 2005].

development on them. From this, he concludes that the film reveals the limitation of the myth of Stephen Chow.¹⁹

Whereas these audience members and critics find the film not as comical as previous Stephen Chow films, others have suggested that the problem lies not in the film itself but in the perspective of the viewers. Critic Long Tin, for instance, observes that it is because the taste of the audience has changed with time so that they cannot enjoy the same dose of Chow's *moleitau* anymore.²⁰ He proposes that since the *moleitau* style is the product of post-Tiananmen Hong Kong in the 1990s, it is no surprise that it has become obsolete when the overall mood of the society has shifted soon after the sovereignty handover.²¹ For this reason, he says, even though *Kung Fu Hustle* still contains *moleitau* ingredients, the lack of enthusiasm among the audience merely indicates that they are no longer in the mood for it and cannot enjoy it whole heartedly. While this understanding points to changes on the reception end, there are those who believe that the audience has refused to change and rejects the changes on the part of the filmmaker. For example, an audience member observes that viewers would likely be disappointed if they simply expect a pure comedy, and points out that the audience has not been fair to Chow as they have framed him into a fixed style

¹⁹ Yip Yam Chung (葉蔭聰) 'Stephen Chow Please Do Not be the Guru of the Generation' (周星馳請不要做一代宗師), 11 January 2005. <http://www.inmediahk.net/public/article?group_id=10&item_id=7899> [accessed 13 February 2007].

²⁰ For my discussion on Stephen Chow's *moleitau* (nonsensical) style, see Chapter 5 section B.

²¹ Long Tin (朗天), 'Kung Fu Hustle and the Change in Moeitau Comedy' (從功夫看無厘頭喜劇的變化) in *Hong Kong Film Review 2004*, ed. Pierre Lam (Hong Kong: Film Critics Society, 2005), 67-69.

when in fact the filmmaker is in the process of transforming from a comedian to a full-fledged storyteller.²² Another member of the audience says that Chow has indeed left his long time fans behind, but does so only because he needs to develop what he is truly after rather than always pleasing his fans.²³ Unlike those who criticise the film as not comical enough, these members of the audience and some critics positively welcome the change in Stephen Chow; they particularly regard it as his conscious move toward becoming a filmmaker and not only a screen comedian.²⁴ Apart from these views that focus on the contrast between a changing director and an unchanging audience, a more substantial issue involves how *Kung Fu Hustle* should be categorised. As some among the audience observe, it should more appropriately be viewed as a kung fu action film rather than a comedy of the typical Stephen Chow style.²⁵ Indeed this is the view adopted by many of the local critics as their reviews mostly approach the film from within the tradition of local action cinema rather than being a *moleitau* comedy.

²² Thomas, 27 December 2004 <<http://www.thomasc.net/index.php?p=134>> [accessed 17 March 2006].

²³ Lam Suet (林雪), 'Stephen Chow Abandons his Old Time Fans' (周星馳離棄舊日 Fans), 31 December 2004 <http://www.cinema.com.hk/oldforum/c_forum_detail.php3?TitleID=33321> [accessed 17 March 2006].

²⁴ Ma Ka Fai (馬家輝), 'Stephen Chow the Director' (導演周星馳), *Mingpao Daily News*, 26 December 2004, D11.

²⁵ Duke of Aberdeen, 'Good Kung Fu' (好功夫), 8 January 2005 <<http://blog.abe.com.hk/archives/145>> [17 February 2007]; Anonymous, 'Obviously You Do Not Understand' (明顯是你看不明白), 4 January 2005 <http://www.cinema.com.hk/oldforum/c_forum_detail.php3?TitleID=33404> [accessed 17 March 2006].

Besides these controversies over whether Stephen Chow is suffering from a creative drought in comedy or transforming his filmmaking style, there is however a far more serious accusation that calls into question Chow's iconic stature. Specifically, some observers regard the overall orientation of *Kung Fu Hustle* as representing Chow's betrayal of his primary supporters and home base in Hong Kong for the sake of appealing to a new market elsewhere. As pointed out earlier, this film marks the first time that Chow's project is funded by investors outside of Hong Kong, especially Hollywood.²⁶ The very presence of foreign investment, while generally regarded in the film industry as a natural and healthy move in the filmmaker's career, has been received with critical scepticism. For example, a newspaper feature article questions why Hong Kong audiences are slow to criticise Chow for appealing to foreigners at the expense of local taste.²⁷ Some disapprove of him mixing and matching diverse elements in the tradition of local action cinema disrespectfully.²⁸ Even those who are more confident in Chow express worries that he would have difficulty balancing the interests of Hong Kong, greater China, and Hollywood.²⁹

²⁶ Columbia Pictures is listed in the film's end credits as the copyright holder.

²⁷ Wong Jing (黃靜), 'In Search of Stephen Chow's Story' (尋找周星馳的故事), *Wen Wei Po*, 11 January 2005.

²⁸ Audience member Thomas mentions that many people have made similar comments, but he regards these criticisms as unfair: Thomas, 27 December 2004 <<http://www.thomasc.net/index.php?p=134>> [accessed 17 March 2006].

²⁹ For example: Siu Sai (小西), 'The Changed and Unchanged in Stephen Chow' (周星馳的變與不變), 11 January 2005 <http://www.inmediahk.net/public/article?item_id=7919&group_id=18> [accessed 17 March 2006].

Nonetheless, my review of the writings by established film and cultural critics reveals that this sort of scepticism does not constitute the majority view. They generally concur that Stephen Chow has taken a significant step in revitalising the heritage of Hong Kong cinema of the past few decades by integrating it with new technologies and bringing it to a wider audience.³⁰ More significant, however, is the fact that *Kung Fu Hustle* has entered the discussion of circles beyond the critics. At the time when the film was on screen, the editorials of two local broadsheet newspapers, namely the *Hong Kong Economic Times* and *Mingpao Daily News*, used the success of *Kung Fu Hustle* for didactic purposes by claiming it as an example which could provide insights for the people of Hong Kong.³¹ The fact that this film and its filmmaker have become the subject matter of these press editorials suggests that Stephen Chow and his project have successfully captured the attention and imagination of journalists outside the usual circle of film critics and the entertainment business. In addition to these discussions in the news media, the university forum mentioned at the beginning of this section also illustrates that the local academic community is beginning to take the massive popularity of Chow more seriously and openly. Despite the sceptical disapproval from some among the audience, the press editorials and the university forum indicate that Chow's position is not only reaffirmed but is being further recognised across different sectors and social classes as an emblem of the whole society of Hong Kong. In other words, the iconic stature of Chow has been raised to a level beyond local popular culture.

³⁰ I am elaborating on this in the next part of this section.

³¹ The didactic use of the film in these editorials is further discussed in a later section 6D.2.

6B.2 *Inheritance and Development of the Legacy of Hong Kong Cinema*

As many local film critics have recognised and mentioned, a conspicuous feature of *Kung Fu Hustle* is its extensive use of ingredients that have characterised Hong Kong cinema of the past few decades. While it has been criticised as being a mere superficial array of different elements from old films,³² it has also been credited as a display of the ‘paradigm shift in Hong Kong action cinema’ in the last century.³³ Indeed the film has drawn upon various subgenres that are representative of different periods in the history of local action films. The killer-musicians hired by the Axe Gang, and the Buddhist Palm³⁴ which the protagonist (played by Stephen Chow himself) uses to defeat the ultimate villain, are both taken from two extremely popular Cantonese *wuxia* (sword fighting) film series produced in the 1960s.³⁵ The three martial arts masters in disguise as tailor, baker and coolie in the Pig Sty Alley are reminiscent of the Mandarin fist fighting kung fu films in the late 1960s to 1970s in the style of Zhang Che.³⁶ The last sequence of the protagonist fighting against the

³² Yip Yam Chung, 'Stephen Chow Please Do Not be the Guru of the Generation'.

³³ Chan Ka-ming, 'Fireless People, Overly Sentimental Hong Kong'; it should be noted that this commentator is harshly critical of the film on the whole.

³⁴ The Buddhist Palm, or Buddha's Palm (如來神掌), is a fictitious fighting style in martial arts that was popularised by the Hong Kong film series of the same name from the 1960s.

³⁵ *Buddha's Palm* (如來神掌, a.k.a. *The Young Swordsman Lung Kim-fei*, 7 episodes, 1964-1968) and *Six-Fingered Lord of the Lute* (六指琴魔, 3 episodes, 1965) are well known to many people in Hong Kong across different generations as they had been adapted into comic books, repeatedly shown on television, remade as film (*Buddha's Palm*, dir. Taylor Wong, 1982) and television drama (*Six-Finger Demon of the Lyre*, TVB, 1985), and eventually the original films were redistributed as VCDs and DVDs in the early twenty first century.

³⁶ For discussion on the legacy of Zhang Che on action films, see Chapter 5 section B, footnote 16.

whole Axe Gang reminds many of the films of Bruce Lee both in terms of the action choreography and the costume style of Chow. That is to say, the action styles that appear in different parts of the film are variations of different subgenres of action films that have been highly popular in the local cinema in the past. In the words of critic Sek Kei, *Kung Fu Hustle* has ‘reconstructed the myth of kung fu with which Hong Kong cinema has shocked the world’ and has treated this myth with ‘full love and sincerity’.³⁷

In addition to drawing on these components in martial arts cinema of the past, the film also makes references to the literary dimension of the martial arts tradition, in particular the *wuxia* novels written by Jin Yong,³⁸ which have captured the imagination of generations of Chinese readers over several decades. Apart from the visual realisation of certain fighting patterns that are frequently described in those fictions, the most prominent literary reference is the identity that the filmmaker assigns to the landlord couple of Pig Sty Alley. Toward the latter part of the narrative the couple identify themselves as the legendary hero and heroine in the popular *wuxia* novel *The Return of the Condor Hero* (神鵰俠侶) (Jin Yong, first published 1959-1961), which are among the most well-liked *wuxia* characters. At that point of the film, all audience simply burst into laughter in a packed cinema,³⁹ as it is

³⁷ Sek Kei's Film Review, *Mingpao Daily News*, 24 December 2004, C9.

³⁸ Jin Yong (金庸, real name: Louis Cha 查良鏞, b. 1924) is a highly regarded author of 15 Chinese *wuxia* novels, all of which were published between the late 1950s and early 1970s and revised by the author himself in the 1970s. In addition to being vastly popular among Chinese people, his works have been translated into several East Asian and European languages, as well as adapted into films, television serial dramas, and comic books for many times.

³⁹ This was my first-hand observation when I was in a cinema in Hong Kong in early January 2005.

hilarious for them to see the middle-aged version of this legendary young couple transplanted into a twentieth century setting.

The title of the film, especially the original Chinese title (功夫 *Kung Fu*), has led many to regard it within the framework of fist fighting kung fu motion pictures. This orientation is reinforced by the appearance of the protagonist in the fighting sequence after his transformation, in which his costume and action bear close resemblance to Bruce Lee. It is reinforced even further by the well known fact that Stephen Chow himself is an unabashed fan of Bruce Lee. When the whole film is considered in its entirety, however, it is clear that the main cinematic reference of *Kung Fu Hustle* is in fact the older Cantonese sword fighting films from the mid twentieth century rather than fist fighting films of the Bruce Lee style. This is evidenced in two components of the film, namely the music score and the ultimate resolution of the story. In the first place all of the fighting sequences are scored with classical ethnic music of the Guangdong (Cantonese) tradition. In Hong Kong these works are often remembered as music of the old Cantonese *wuxia* films, in which they have been extensively used. As a member of the audience has mentioned, these melodies do serve to remind the viewers of the traditional spirit of the martial arts masters.⁴⁰ Secondly, apart from the two group fighting sequences,⁴¹ all of the major

⁴⁰ Ric, 'Kung Fu Hustle Continues with the Lost Martial Arts Spirits' (功夫延續失落的俠義精神), HK EdCity, 1 January 2005 <http://www.hkedcity.net/library/review/view.phtml?file_id=40831> [accessed 19 March 2006].

⁴¹ These include the two fighting scenes in Pig Sty Alley that the Axe Gang is fought by the three kung fu masters and later by the protagonist.

action scenes are stylistically modelled after the sword fighting *wuxia* films in which the characters can ‘fly’ around and fight with supra-human abilities. Most importantly, as one commentator perceptively points out, the most crucial martial art used by the protagonist is not kung fu of the Bruce Lee style but the Buddha’s Palm,⁴² which is itself a legendary form of supra-human martial arts taken directly from the Cantonese film series bearing that title. Notably it is by the protagonist's use of the Buddha's Palm that the ultimate villain Beast is defeated and the final confrontation is brought to an end. In short, therefore, Stephen Chow has in essence connected the film to an older heritage in Hong Kong cinema that is entirely a local invention without contemporary parallels in neighbouring societies and cultures.

The attempt by Stephen Chow to pull together originally unrelated components freely and irreverently can be criticised as not treating the well regarded characters and heritage with due respect, because *Kung Fu Hustle* has not followed the characterisations and original narrative patterns of those action films and novels in any strict sense.⁴³ Concomitantly the film’s pervasive use of computer technology in retouching the kung fu fighting scenes has also been criticised as being essentially 'anti kung fu' while paying lip service to it.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, as Sek Kei points out, the

⁴² Ma Ka Fai (馬家輝), 'The Boy who Believes in Miracles' (相信奇蹟的男孩), *Mingpao Daily News*, 27 December 2004, D7.

⁴³ For example, Beast, whose name in Chinese is ‘Huo Yun Xie Shen’ (火雲邪神, literally: ‘the evil spirit of fire and cloud’), was not a villain but the master of Buddhist Palm in the original film series *Buddha's Palm*. In *Kung Fu Hustle*, the character becomes the protagonist’s opponent who is finally defeated by the latter’s Buddhist Palm.

⁴⁴ Long Tin, 'Kung Fu Hustle and the Change in Moleitau Comedy', in *Hong Kong Film Review 2004*, 67-69.

essence of *Kung Fu Hustle* is the filmmaker's 'magical and imaginative approach' in reconstructing the 'myth of the martial arts jungle'.⁴⁵ Also, as cultural commentator Bernadette Tsui observes, it is perhaps an overstatement to call *Kung Fu Hustle* a tribute to the martial arts film, and yet Chow has indeed 'brought a rebirth to kung fu, and integrate [his] new comic approach with modern technology', among other achievements in the film.⁴⁶ In this regard, another cultural commentator Ma Ka Fai has offered a helpful analogy as he compares Stephen Chow to a naughty little boy who adds his own sketches onto the comics he reads, and passes his re-created version around to share the fun with others.⁴⁷ Ma further observes that in this re-creation of old Cantonese *wuxia* film, the seriousness and heaviness that characterise the originals have been replaced by a different orientation, in which 'death and joy coexist, humour and horror live together'.⁴⁸ In other words, Stephen Chow has added his own playful touch onto an old cinematic tradition for his contemporary audience.

6B.3 *Concluding Remarks*

In this section I have examined how the film has been received by the local audience and commentators in Hong Kong, particularly in terms of the stature of Stephen Chow as an established icon in the local popular cultural scene, and also in terms of the relationship between this film and the action cinema tradition in Hong

⁴⁵ Sek Kei's Film Review, *Mingpao Daily News*, 24 December 2004, C9.

⁴⁶ Bernadette Tsui (徐詠璇), 'Is *Kung Fu Hustle* Enjoyable?' (《功夫》好看不?), *Mingpao Daily News*, 20 December 2004, D7.

⁴⁷ Ma Ka Fai, 'The Boy who Believes in Miracles', *Mingpao Daily News*, 27 December 2004, D7.

⁴⁸ With a similar observation, Sek Kei also characterises the film as 'intense black humour'. (Sek Kei's Film Review, *Mingpao Daily News*, 24 December 2004, C9.)

Kong. My review of their writings reveals that despite being a historical top grossing local film, *Kung Fu Hustle* has encountered considerable criticisms during its cinema release. Some members of the audience, especially the long time loyal supporters of Chow's films, have identified significant discontinuities between this film and his previous works. On this basis they question whether the filmmaker is betraying his local supporters and home base for the sake of appealing to new markets elsewhere. While this is a serious accusation for someone who has been recognised as an icon of local culture, this view is not held by most of the established critics. Instead they welcome the development identified in *Kung Fu Hustle* as a step in the transformation of Chow from being a screen comedian to becoming a creative filmmaker.

At the same time, the criticism that *Kung Fu Hustle* is disrespectfully playing with elements from old action films also has not been echoed by many. On the contrary, a number of film and cultural critics applaud Chow's attempt to bring new life into an old tradition by integrating it with new technologies and new twists in creative ideas. This effort of Chow in making the film is reminiscent of the story in *Shaolin Soccer*, in which Mighty Steel Leg's self-pronounced mission is to study how an old tradition can be applied to modern life. In this sense, Stephen Chow is putting into real-life practice what he has previously done in a story, although the outcome is not free from controversy.

6C. *Kung Fu Hustle* as a Story of Hong Kong People and Society

In the last section (6B) I have discussed the important position that *Kung Fu Hustle* occupies in the cinema and popular culture of Hong Kong. In particular, I have pointed out that the film has not only reconfirmed the iconic status of Stephen Chow in local popular culture but also, as a result of the enthusiastic response from the mainstream news media as well as local scholars of humanities, served to consolidate his position in the Hong Kong society at large. In this section, I continue to examine the film text and its interconnectedness with the sociocultural context, especially as perceived by local critics and audience. By scrutinising the film narrative and how it has been received during its theatrical release, I find that the significance of *Kung Fu Hustle* for many among the Hong Kong audience is manifested mainly in two aspects – the story's gesture of locating the marginal to the centre stage of events, and more importantly, the essence of the film as a narrative of memory. Memory is not merely a crucial narrative element within the story but also an important extra-narrative component of the film. Specifically, the overall creative orientation of the film is perceived as connecting the local audience to some of their past memories of living in the city, the popular culture that they have consumed, as well as the old values they treasure.

6C.1 *A Story that Locates the Marginal at the Centre*

As in the case of *Shaolin Soccer*, *Kung Fu Hustle* is also a story of the underdog. After an opening sequence which portrays the world of the rich, the powerful, and the treacherous that seem to be in control of the society's operations,

the audience is introduced to the main setting of the story, Pig Sty Alley. This is an old residential area that is inhabited by those who can find no place in society. As explicitly stated in the caption that leads into this part of the narrative, this area is a small haven away from widespread violence during a turbulent time. The residents' extreme poverty becomes an advantage that keeps them from falling prey to the underworld gangs. Notwithstanding this advantage, it is nonetheless a marginal community that is excluded from the centre of society.

That the filmmakers set the centre stage of the story within this marginal community is noteworthy. In this world created by Stephen Chow, these marginal people are not at the margin despite their displacement from the mainstream society. Instead, they constitute the main players in the film. They are portrayed as heroes who exhibit extraordinary moral and physical strength, and who are ready to stand up not just for themselves but for the lives of others. At first glance, these residents of Pig Sty Alley are merely the ordinary poor who try to survive on a basic level of subsistence. As the narrative unveils, however, the audience is presented with one after another hidden hero from within this marginal community, all of whom have their extraordinariness under the façade of ordinariness, and exhibit their own form of power in the seeming powerlessness.

First there is the young barber who stands up squarely against the attempted blackmailing of the protagonist who pretends to be a member of the treacherous Axe Gang. This action of the barber, though apparently simple, demonstrates the moral

strength of the young man who was previously shown to be filthy. Then in the hilarious scene that follows, which depicts the moment when the Pig Sty Alley residents stand up in support of the barber, one by one they are presented as having unexpected physical strengths. They include the peasant woman who strikes with a forceful fist, the slim young man who is exceptionally tall, and the middle-aged man and the small boy who are remarkably muscular. While unexpectedness of this sort is installed for the sake of comic effects in the drama, it also communicates a sense that these seemingly ordinary residents of the alley are not as ordinary as they appear to be. It therefore also prepares the way for the subsequent sequence, in which the hidden moral and physical strengths of these people are fully unveiled during their resistance against the threat of the real Axe Gang. In that sequence which depicts the Pig Sty Alley being endangered by the Axe Gang, the solidarity of this marginal community is immediately demonstrated in their silent resistance and when they tie their fate together in face of the threat.

When the life of a little girl is at stake, the three hidden kung fu masters suddenly emerge to fight against the gang in protection of their neighbours, resulting in the first elaborate action scene of the film. By coming out of their disguised identities as coolie, baker, and tailor, the three masters are in fact putting themselves at risk. Regardless of their mastery of kung fu, the exposure of their true identities in this instance eventually costs them their lives in a later point in the story.⁴⁹ This

⁴⁹ This phenomenon should be understood within the tradition of Chinese *wuxia* novels. In those stories, the heroes are often described as having superb mastery of martial arts but choose to hide their true identities. The purpose of their hiding is often to avoid conflicts and turmoils of the *jianghu* (江湖, literally: rivers and lakes, referring to the 'world' of the *wuxia* fictions) in exchange for quiet lives, and possibly also to escape from murder by their former enemies.

action on the part of the three kung fu masters is thus not only a demonstration of their superb physical capabilities but also their moral courage.⁵⁰

The same unexpected manifestation of physical ability and moral strength is also seen in the landlord couple. Throughout the earlier sequences of the film, the landlord is characterised as licentious and timid, whereas the landlady is mean and unmerciful. The relentlessness of the landlady is underpinned when she, for fear of the gang's revenge, expels the kung fu masters after they win the fight against the gang and retain temporary peacefulness in the alley. Subsequently, however, when the lives of the masters are truly endangered by the killer-musicians hired by the Axe Gang, the couple stand up to protect them and dispel the killers. This exposure of their own identities as martial arts masters of an even higher level also entails the risk to their own lives in the eventual development of the story.

In short, the residents in Pig Sty Alley, while being an excluded community at the margin of the society, are portrayed in *Kung Fu Hustle* as a group of hidden and unexpected heroes who surprise the audience not only with their extraordinary physical strengths but also with their moral strengths and remarkable solidarity. The filmmakers have placed this otherwise marginal community at the centre of the stage and tell the story of these people who would easily be ignored and despised at a superficial glimpse.

⁵⁰ The demonstration of moral courage by martial arts masters is also characteristic of Chinese *wuxia* novels and films, and is also consistent with the classical Chinese ideal of the virtuous person.

It is noteworthy that this relocation of the marginal to the centre is demonstrated not only within the fictitious narrative but also through the film's casting, since almost all of the main actors in the film are not major players in the local commercial cinema. They include both non-professional talents as well as actors from an earlier generation who have not been active on screen for decades. Despite their unfamiliarity and lack of glamour, they are given the spotlight in this film. In other words, *Kung Fu Hustle* is more than a story about the marginal; it is in part a collective effort that includes the excluded in its creation. Apart from the casting of Stephen Chow himself as the ultimate hero,⁵¹ the relatively unknown artists are all positioned in significant roles and have been received enthusiastically by the local audience,⁵² instead of being sidelined to play cosmetic roles. This endeavour of the filmmakers, which is seldom seen in mainstream Hong Kong cinema, is applauded as a courageous venture by some among the audience. For instance, an audience member humorously calls this cast of actors 'broken inside out', and asks rhetorically if there is any other film director in Hong Kong who 'dares to cast such actors that are broken inside out to play the leading roles and release their

⁵¹ This casting arrangement should be understandable in this case since the film is a piece of mass entertainment which demands considerable certainty in its commercial success.

⁵² There are even comments that the performances of these actors in major supportive roles have outshone that of Stephen Chow. For example, audience member Alan Lin (Alan Lin's Random Thoughts, 23 December 2004 <<http://alan.lin.name/archives/2004/12/23/kung-fu-hustle>> [accessed 17 March 2006]) thinks that the performance by the landlord couple and Beast are the most impressive; another observes that the landlady's role is in fact the leading female role (Xiaohun (小混), 'Simple but Enjoyable – on *Kung Fu Hustle*' (簡單但是好看—說功夫), 18 April 2005 <http://www.hkedcity.net/library/review/view.phtml?file_id=46449> [accessed 17 March 2006]).

potentials'.⁵³ Likewise, cultural critic Bernadette Tsui also acknowledges the director's respectful treatment of his unknown cast and comments that 'in the eyes of Stephen Chow every minor person is lovely and cannot be despised; regardless of who they are, they all have their own lives.'⁵⁴

In essence, this gesture of the film to locate the marginal at the centre subverts the conventional relationship between the centre and the margin. It takes a different approach from the usual convention which excludes the marginal from the society and which assigns them a position that is hidden from the majority. Instead, the film locates those that are often unseen and forgotten at the centre of events right under the spotlight, and thereby redefines what is marginal and excluded. In this sense, *Kung Fu Hustle* is in essence a subversive story for Hong Kong people. The importance of this subversive aspect for the Hong Kong audience becomes even more palpable when it is understood in relation to Stephen Chow's previous film *Shaolin Soccer*. As I have pointed out in Chapter Five,⁵⁵ one important aspect of that film is its expression of the hidden fear of marginalisation that is prevalent among many Hong Kong people at the beginning of the century. *Kung Fu Hustle* tackles this collective fear with a different approach. By placing the marginal at the centre, the film implicitly suggests to the audience that it is not necessary to adopt the

⁵³ Siu Sai, 'The Changed and Unchanged in Stephen Chow', 11 January 2005 <http://www.inmediahk.net/public/article?item_id=7919&group_id=18> [accessed 17 March 2006].

⁵⁴ Bernadette Tsui, 'Is *Kung Fu Hustle* Enjoyable?', *Mingpao Daily News*, 20 December 2004. D7.

⁵⁵ See Section 5C.

conventional definition of what is being marginal; and by displaying the hidden power of the excluded, it reminds the audience that power is not always in the hands of the seemingly powerful at the centre. As Bernadette Tsui suggests, in this film Chow has ‘redefined what are minor persons and small heroes’.⁵⁶ This orientation of subversive redefinition interrogates some of the common practices in the public expression of Christian faith as exemplified in the local Christian films,⁵⁷ which often tend to cast high profile celebrities in major roles regardless of their religious orientations, and often focus on issues that concern the middle or upper class.

6C.2 *A Story of Memory*

In addition to locating the marginal to the centre of events, the essence of *Kung Fu Hustle* as a story of Hong Kong is also manifested through its multiple connections to different facets of the memory of many Hong Kong people. This dimension of the film is to be understood both in terms of the film narrative and also its perceived interconnectivity with the social context.

6C.2.1 The Centrality of Memory in the Narrative

While it is often overlooked by local critics and audience,⁵⁸ a careful scrutiny of the narrative reveals that memory is in fact an indispensable central component in the story. The childhood memory of the protagonist is the primary trigger behind the

⁵⁶ Bernadette Tsui, 'Is Kung Fu Hustle Enjoyable?'

⁵⁷ See Chapter 3.

⁵⁸ None of the the writings by local critics and audience that I have reviewed have touched on the importance of memory in the story.

whole story and also the prime motivation that causes his drastic change toward the latter part of the story, when he turns against the evil gang and the invincible Beast.⁵⁹ Visually, this childhood memory is symbolically represented in the lollipop which appears in key moments throughout the film from the flashback until the final scene.

What the lollipop symbolises is the protagonist's childhood memory, including his virtuous values which he has suppressed throughout the large part of the narrative. The reason for this suppression is revealed in the flashback sequence which portrays the loss of his virtues. First he was deceived into surrendering his entire savings in exchange for a fraudulent manual of Buddhist Palm, for the goodwill of saving the world and maintaining world peace.⁶⁰ Then, he was beaten and insulted when trying to save a girl from bullying with his newly acquired skill in Buddhist Palm, but only to realise that the manual was only a cheap comic book. In the protagonist's own words, 'from that moment onward I knew it was not viable to be a good man, so I decided to be a bad guy.' This self confession explains his scoundrelly behaviour throughout a large part of the story. Even so, the film also shows him bungling as a villain. Besides being a source for constructing comic situations, this clumsiness also suggests that he is not treacherous by nature. The

⁵⁹ Without the element of memory in perspective, this character change has been criticised as being sudden and unconvincing. This view is expressed, for example, by Yung Kin Wai (翁健偉), <http://www.cinema.com.hk/oldforum/c_forum_detail.php3?TitleID=33365> [19 March 2006]. As Stephen Chow admits in an interview, the film is not clear enough in relating the protagonist's psychology around this turning point. In the same interview, he gives an explicit explanation of his directorial intent on this, and states that it is the protagonist's memory of his childhood ideals that leads to his return to conscience. See: Ng Chun Hung, 'The Treasure is in the Local, Kung Fu is Well Practised (Stephen Chow Interview)' (地道當係寶, 功夫練得好), *Sunday Mingpao*, 16 January 2005, D2-3.

⁶⁰ Such is the reason that the fraud uses to sell him the 'manual'.

flashback sequence and the protagonist's own words indicate that his villainy is a reaction to his traumatic childhood experiences, first of being cheated because of his simple hope for a better world, and of being bullied and insulted when trying to defend the weak.

While memories of trauma have led the protagonist to put aside the values that he used to hold, it is also memory of the past that leads to his return to virtue. This process of rediscovery is prompted by his re-encounter with the girl whom he failed to defend as a child, though ironically it occurs as he tries to rob the latter who is working as an ice cream vendor.⁶¹ Although at that moment he is unable to handle the sudden resurgence of this suppressed memory, this incident is the starting point of his subsequent change of direction.⁶² The re-emergence of his original sense of good and evil is seen when he acts against the order of the gang boss during the critical moment of the feud between the landlord couple and Beast. His act of striking at Beast instead of the couple is a small but significant sign of renouncing the treacherous side in himself. This return to virtue is then confirmed in what could be his 'last word' when he draws the shape of a lollipop on the ground after he is fatally injured by Beast. With an extreme close up on his hand drawing this visual symbol, the film underscores that at this critical moment of life and death the protagonist is totally occupied with his memory of the past. This memory, while ambivalent, is

⁶¹ While often overlooked, this point has been explicitly stated by Stephen Chow during an interview. See: Ng Chun Hung, 'The Treasure is in the Local', D2-3.

⁶² In terms of dramatic development, the protagonist's reconciliation with his past memory lacks a visible process; therefore numerous reviews consider his later character change as sudden.

filled with his heroic intention to defend the weak, his aspiration to do justice, and also the little girl whom he has failed to save. In this manner, that which begins as a bungled robbery becomes the starting point of the protagonist's reconciliation with his own memory and reclaiming his virtues from the past, which eventually entails the realisation of his hidden identity as the ultimate hero in the story.

In short, memory plays a central role in the whole story. It is the antecedent which activates the narrative and also the primary motivation that prompts his eventual return to his earlier virtues. In addition to its centrality in the narrative, however, this narrative of memory is important because of its relationship with two other aspects of the film. First, it is connected to the film's societal dimension, which I discuss below; second, it forms the basis of the film's vision of hope, to which I shall return in the next major section (5D).

6C.2.2 Reference to the Collective Memories of Hong Kong People

Apart from being the crux of the plot, another dimension of *Kung Fu Hustle* as a story of memory is manifested in its connectedness to various elements in the collective memories of many Hong Kong people. In particular, as some critics and audience members point out, certain key elements in the film are reminiscent of some of the shared memories of local residents over the last half century.

One of the most prominent elements that would catch the attention of many of the Hong Kong audience is the main locale of the story, Pig Sty Alley. From its

name to its many characteristics, the place is parodic of an old district in Hong Kong, the Kowloon Walled City. First of all, the original Chinese name of the Alley, *Zhu Long Cheng Zhai* (豬籠城寨), is itself a pun on the name of the Walled City, which in Chinese is *Jiu Long Cheng Zhai* (九龍城寨). It should be noted that this wordplay can be fully appreciated only by Cantonese speakers who constitute the majority of the Hong Kong population, and thus carries for them a special meaning that is hardly comprehensible for audiences from other languages and cultures. In Cantonese the name ‘Kowloon’ is pronounced in exactly the same way as ‘dog cage’, and has always been a joke among local children across different generations. It is obvious for the local audience that Pig Sty Alley is in fact a spoof of ‘dog cage alley’, the Kowloon Walled City.

In addition to their close similarity in names, Pig Sty Alley also resembles the Kowloon Walled City in its essential character. Both are physically deplorable as residential areas, and both are marginal communities populated with the poor whom the mainstream of their societies tend to ignore. In reality, the Walled City is an anomaly within the city of Hong Kong in the course of almost the whole twentieth century until it was completely demolished by the government in the early 1990s. Constitutionally, due to a special arrangement between the Chinese (imperial) government and the British, it never came under colonial governance when its surrounding area became part of the colony of Hong Kong in 1898. As a result, the Walled City became a haven for refugees, illegal residents, and the underworld,

especially after the Communist Party came to power in China in 1949.⁶³ While many outsiders would consider it crowded, disorganised, lawless and fearsome, it was also relatively untouched by colonial bureaucracy. In the words of an unnamed foreign observer, residents in the Walled City who fled the Chinese Communist regime ‘could live as Chinese among other Chinese, untaxed, uncounted and untormented by governments of any kind’.⁶⁴ This marginal community was a special city within the city, and was regarded as the ‘rarest of thing, a working model of an anarchist society’.⁶⁵ Hence Pig Sty Alley parallels the Kowloon Walled City in that it is inhabited with hidden heroes who try to live their normal lives at the humblest level of the society, and is free from interference from power outside of the community because of its special circumstances. At the same time, it is also a stronghold of resistance against the dominant power in the surroundings.

Nonetheless, what Pig Sty Alley alludes to is beyond the Walled City itself. Depiction of life in the alley is reminiscent of the living condition of many people in Hong Kong around the mid twentieth century as well as cinematic representation of it. During that time when the city was receiving a massive influx of refugees fleeing

⁶³ For an overview of the earlier history of the place, see: Elizabeth Sinn ‘Kowloon Walled City: Its Origin and Early History’, in *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 27 (1987): 30-45. For a collection of real life stories inside the Walled City toward the latter part of its history, see: Ian Lambot and Greg Gerard, *City of Darkness: Life in Kowloon Walled City* (Surrey: Watermark Publications, 1999). A somewhat indirect account of underworld activities in the Walled City can be found in Jackie Pullinger, *Crack in the Wall: The Life and Death of Kowloon Walled City* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993).

⁶⁴ ‘Kowloon Walled City’, Newslines, Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, Issue 03.02 (n.d.) <<http://www.arch.columbia.edu/gsap/21536>> [accessed 1 December 2006].

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

the Chinese communist regime, Hong Kong was regarded as a sanctuary at the margin of a country in turmoil. Due to this sudden and rapid increase of a refugee population, it was also a time when the majority of the population was struggling to survive amidst material scarcity and many ordinary families were packed together to share a small flat. Life in Hong Kong of this period has been captured in numerous local films produced since the 1950s. In particular, critics have pointed out that the portrayal of daily life in *Pig Sty Alley* closely resembles the scenario depicted in *The House of 72 Tenants* (七十二家房客, dir. Chor Yuen, 1973).⁶⁶ *Kung Fu Hustle* and *The House of 72 Tenants* similarly picture situations such as restricted water supply, the unscrupulous landlady, as well as the cohabitation of tenants from different parts of China and speaking different dialects under the same roof. Many of these circumstances were realities of life for many Hong Kong people a few decades ago.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ This is implied in Wong Ain-ling, 'Preface' in *The Hong Kong - Guangdong Film Connection* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2005), 8. Although that film is in fact a free adaptation of a popular stage comedy in Shanghai of the 1940s, and has previously been adapted on screen in by Zhujiang Film Studio in Guangzhou (dir. Wang Weiwei 王為一, 1963), the Hong Kong version of *The House of 72 Tenants* has been fully adapted to the local context, addresses contemporary local issues, and speaks the local language. Its satirical representation of life in lower class Hong Kong is considered realistic for its days and is in line with a tradition of realism in the local cinema that particularly flourished in the 1950s. Also, *The House of 72 Tenants* is important as it is emblematic of the rejuvenation of local Cantonese cinema. Although Cantonese is the mother tongue for the majority of Hong Kong Chinese, the local Cantonese film industry experienced a sharp decline in the late 1960s and virtually ceased to exist in the beginning of the 1970s. Possible causes for this decline include new competition from free television service (TVB, launched 19 November 1967) and desertion by the audience as a result of poor quality due to over-production. The other stream in the local film industry, the Mandarin cinema, which was generally perceived to be more 'classy' and of better quality, continued to flourish. *The House of 72 Tenants* was the first Cantonese-speaking film to be produced after 1971, and was the first Cantonese film from Shaw Brothers Studio which has previously focused on the Mandarin market. On screen for a whole month from 22 September 1973, the film broke the box office records of local productions with a total gross of HKD 5.6 million. According to Stephen Teo, it is 'the film which revived the Cantonese dialect cinema in the early 70s'. (Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema*, 57). See also his 'The 1970s: Movement and Transition', in *The Cinema of Hong Kong*, ed. Poshek Fu and David Desser, 90-110, especially the section on 'Cantonese Comes Back' in pp. 94-97.

⁶⁷ For example, the *Kung Fu Hustle* landlady threatens to restrict water supply to four hours every four days; this was a real experience for the whole of Hong Kong on several occasions in the 1960s, when the government used this drastic measure in the face of serious water shortages.

They are vividly remembered by people who have experienced that period, and have been captured on screen numerous times.⁶⁸ As the main setting of *Kung Fu Hustle*, Pig Sty Alley is a microcosmic representation of real life situations of common people in Hong Kong of the recent past. In this sense, the film connects many among the local audience to the memory of life's hardship that is common in the recent past of the city.

In addition to its reminiscence of the lives of common folk in the past, I have pointed out in an earlier section that *Kung Fu Hustle* as an action film also bonds with the local martial arts tradition that has manifested itself in the popular culture in both print and audiovisual media.⁶⁹ As I have discussed in Chapter Four, this tradition has for a long time been considered the most representative stream in Hong Kong popular culture and has wide appeal both locally and elsewhere. It is part of the living memory of many local people across generations. In this sense, the film's claim of connection to this heritage is significant since it is a bonding with an essential dimension of the local cultural memory. Even more importantly, during the release of *Kung Fu Hustle*, local media and critics bestowed upon the martial arts tradition a special meaning that is beyond martial arts and popular culture. Because of the apparent success of the genre in export and in influencing popular culture in East Asia and ethnic Chinese worldwide, martial arts fictions, films, and television dramas are

⁶⁸ For example, the image of the unscrupulous landlady was very popular in the 1950s to 1960s, and was often played by the actress Tou Sam Goo (陶三姑), who is in fact remembered by many local people for her role as a landlady.

⁶⁹ See section 6B.1.

taken as a signification of local wisdom and creativity of Hong Kong people over the past few decades.⁷⁰ In this sense, then, the film connects its local audience to that part of their local culture which can be a reservoir of resources that empowers them in the face of depression. Thereby, *Kung Fu Hustle* relates the story of memory to its vision of hope, which is to be discussed in the next section (6D).

6C.3 *Concluding Remarks*

In this section, I have closely examined the film narrative alongside its reception by local audience and critics, focusing especially on the perceived interconnectivity between the film and its social context. By so doing I have identified two dimensions of the essential nature of *Kung Fu Hustle* as a story of Hong Kong people and society.

In the first place, it relocates that which is conventionally regarded as the marginal to the centre of events, and thereby subverts the conventional hierarchy of centre and margin. Not only is the film a story about the underdog and the unlikely hero, as in the case of many other films of Stephen Chow, but also as a creative project it puts in the limelight a group of unglamorous people who may not otherwise be featured in the mainstream media. This gesture of relocating the marginal to the centre constitutes a particularly important message for the Hong Kong audience, since during the time around the film's release, there was an increasing sense among many people that they were collectively marginalised as a society.⁷¹ In his own way,

⁷⁰ This point will be further discussed in the next section (6D).

⁷¹ See 'Conclusion' in Chapter 5.

Stephen Chow offers a different definition of being marginal, not only by telling a story but by the way in which he tells the story. By this he communicates a subversive message that the marginal in the conventional sense is not necessarily marginal, and hence puts forth a redefinition of margin and centre.

Secondly, *Kung Fu Hustle* connects many Hong Kong people with their collective cultural memory of the last half a century. In addition to being a story which hinges on memory as the crux of the narrative, several major elements in the film are reminiscent of aspects of life in Hong Kong over the past decades. By constructing a parodic re-imagination of the Kowloon Walled City as the story's major locale, the film reminds the contemporary local audience of the life of a generation in the recent past. Concomitantly, the film's extensive references to various subgenres of older martial arts films connect the audience to that which is often regarded as one of the most important components in the city's popular cultural heritage, and has also been considered as an epithet of local wisdom and creativity. It is on the basis of this narrative of memory that *Kung Fu Hustle* builds its vision of hope, to which I turn in the next section.

6D. The Vision of Hope in *Kung Fu Hustle*

As discussed in the last section, *Kung Fu Hustle* is essentially a subversive story which relocates the marginal to the centre of events and is also a story of memory. In this section I continue to discuss how these two features of the film are

directly related to its vision of hope. First, I shall investigate the nature of this vision as it is expressed in the film narrative. Second, I shall explore the reception and interpretation of this vision in Hong Kong by examining how the film has been claimed and owned by local audience, critics, as well as the press. By means of this I shall demonstrate that *Kung Fu Hustle* has been received locally as proposing a way forward for Hong Kong at a time when the city as a whole is caught in a mood of loss and can hardly see its prospect. Concurrently, by considering the vision of hope in this film in relation to that in *Shaolin Soccer*, I shall suggest that its message is a continuation and concrete realisation of the latter.

6D.1 *Hope in the Solidarity of the Marginal*

Although not portrayed as explicitly and detailed as in the case of *Shaolin Soccer*,⁷² the solidarity of the common folk does constitute an important part of the vision of hope in *Kung Fu Hustle*. Without the selfless mutual support exhibited by the residents of Pig Sty Alley, the whole community would not have survived the first assault from the Axe Gang in the earlier part of the film. In the face of the gang's treachery, their unity is evidenced in their togetherness in silent resistance, in which none is willing to be an informant for the gang in exchange of favours. When threatened with a life and death situation, the three hidden kung fu masters put aside their concealed identity and stand out to defend the community. This experience of fighting together is also the moment at which the three masters build their camaraderie as they suddenly realise the true identity of one another. Subsequently

⁷² For my discussion on the treatment of the issue in *Shaolin Soccer*, see Chapter 5 section D.2.

after the Axe Gang is expelled and the landlady orders the three masters to depart, the whole community again demonstrates its solidarity by standing behind the masters who have saved their lives. Even the landlady, though portrayed to be a mean character in this and previous scenes and in constant tension with her tenants, is shown to be one of them as the story unfolds. This side of hers is revealed when the landlady stands up in defence of the kung fu masters when they are later overpowered by the killer-musicians, despite her earlier nasty comments about them.

Unlike the story of *Shaolin Soccer*, however, this depiction of solidarity of the common folk in *Kung Fu Hustle* is limited since it is not maintained throughout the whole narrative. The story eventually develops into the heroic account of one man. Most significantly, the final resolution which is brought about by the defeat of Beast hinges singularly on the miraculous action of the protagonist. As such, the film's vision of hope can be criticised as essentially individualistic, because the ultimate resolution is solely dependent on an individual. It is the protagonist who single-handedly wins the final battle and evicts the evil force, and the whole Pig Sty community has no part in it despite the portrayal of their solidarity in the earlier sequences. In terms of the drama, the marginal community only serves as a build up to pave the way for the emergence of the protagonist as 'the one'. Even his close partner who has always been with him throughout the large part of the narrative is driven away at the critical moment when he cannot face the resurgence of memory of his own past. In the process of his self-discovery, the protagonist is on his own. The only characters who have played significant parts are the landlord couple. In his fatal

injury, it is the latter's rescuing effort that makes his recovery possible, although the film also emphasises through the landlord's words that it is primarily the inborn superior nature of the protagonist that enables him to go through the metamorphosis to re-emerge as the invincible one. In short, by presenting a resolution that depends on the miraculous emergence of a single hero, the film betrays an individualistic vision of hope.

Notwithstanding this individualism, however, the representation of solidarity of the common people is maintained in the film through the portrayal of the protagonist's socio-economic background. Although he is an outsider to the Pig Sty Alley community and has even tried to take advantage of them in his desperate days, he is essentially one of them in terms of background. As in the case of the alley's tenants, he has to struggle at the margin, even to the extent of joining the Axe Gang in order to squeeze into the centre. Yet as soon as he discovers and assumes his true identity he chooses to side with the marginal community. This choice demonstrates his moral superiority to Beast who is solely concerned with excellence in skills and obsessed with winning the fight. In other words, the ultimate hero in *Kung Fu Hustle* who brings in the final resolution all on his own is also a marginal figure who emerges from among the common folk and eventually returns to them. By means of this arrangement in characterisation the film reaffirms its advocacy for the solidarity of the marginal.

Also, while the protagonist stands out as far above the rest of the characters and even the other martial arts masters, it should be noted that this depiction of different tiers of prowess in martial arts in fact echoes the established *wuxia* tradition, which is often expressed idiomatically as ‘for every high mountain there is always an even higher one’ (*yi shan hai you yi shan gao* 一山還有一山高).⁷³ It is not only prevalent in the *wuxia* fictions but has entered daily lives as a popular concept and is applied to the mastery of all kinds of skills and knowledge beyond martial arts. Therefore, although the depiction of solidarity of the common people in *Kung Fu Hustle* appears to be limited, it nonetheless echoes with the popular beliefs of many.

In short, as one component of the film's vision of hope, solidarity of the marginal is affirmed in *Kung Fu Hustle* by the film's portrayal of its ultimate hero as one who emerges from the same background as the marginal community. In the filmmaker's vision, the endeavour to transform the fate of this marginalised community has to come from the same socio-economic and cultural stratum rather than being an elite from the outside who breaks into their world as a saviour.⁷⁴ At the same time, the film also injects into this representation of solidarity a notion of hierarchy of martial arts prowess which is characteristic of the Chinese *wuxia* tradition and also widely accepted among the people. Rather than undermining its

⁷³ The same observation has been made by Ric (in 'Kung Fu Hustle Continues with the Lost Martial Arts Spirits' <http://www.hkedcity.net/library/review/view.phtml?file_id=40831> [accessed 19 March 2006]) and Sek Kei (in Sek Kei's Film Review, *Mingpao Daily News*, 24 December 2004, C9), among others.

⁷⁴ This is consistent with the portrayal of the protagonist as carrier of hope in *Shaolin Soccer*. See chapter 5 section D.1.

affirmation of solidarity, the depiction of the protagonist as superior to the rest serves to build rapport with the local audience since it is consistent with popular sensibilities and belief.

6D.2 *Hope in the Reconnection with Memory*

As discussed in the previous section (6C), *Kung Fu Hustle* is a story about memory. This narrative of memory is closely interrelated with the film's vision of hope since it attaches primary importance to the reconnection with and reactivation of memories. In the following pages, I shall explore the film's vision of hope on two levels. First, on the narrative level, the reconnection and reactivation of memory points to the protagonist's reconciliation with the past from which he has distanced himself. Second, on the reception level, interpretations by critics and audience apply this narrative of memory onto their own circumstances and regard the film as demonstrating a way to capitalise on resources from the past. On both levels, the past is considered as a source of inherited values and as a resource that can enrich the individual and the community in the face of present and upcoming crises.

6D.2.1 Reconnecting with Old Traditions and Values

An important aspect of reconnection with memories in *Kung Fu Hustle* is the traditions and values inherent in those memories. In the story, the protagonist's discovery of his true identity as the ultimate hero is the result of his reconnection with a childhood memory. The return of his abandoned sense of mission is triggered by his being confronted with memory of the past. In terms of plot development, the

defeat of the Axe Gang and Beast would not have occurred and the state of peace in the ending scene would not be realised if the protagonist had never been confronted with his past memory. In this sense, the notion of hope in *Kung Fu Hustle* is a paradoxical one, according to which hope for the future is dependent on memory of the past. It is through the reconciliation with the suppressed memory of an unwanted past that the protagonist is liberated and no longer has to escape from his true sense of mission. Memory is thus depicted in the film as being salvific. It is due to the protagonist's reconnection with it that he himself and the whole marginal community can be saved from destruction.

The significance of this vision of hope goes beyond the theme and premise of the story per se. A number of critics regard *Kung Fu Hustle* as a film project that puts into practice this notion of reconnecting with the past. They concur that the film has revitalised an aspect in the heritage of Hong Kong cinema which has often been ignored. For instance, Sek Kei comments that the film has not only reconstructed the kung fu myth for which Hong Kong cinema is well known but also connects itself to the deeper and older heritage of Chinese *wuxia* tradition as well as the tradition of the 'common folk cinema' from old Shanghai to old Hong Kong.⁷⁵ Similarly, Ma Ka Fai also considers the film an extension and revitalisation of the old martial arts tradition, in particular that of the old Cantonese films from the 1950s. He comments that Chow has added his own flavour to a 'rich and idiosyncratic tradition', by 'putting a new dress onto it (CGI), adding some small flowers (the comic elements), and yet

⁷⁵ Sek Kei's Film Review, *Mingpao Daily News*, 24 December 2004, C9.

maintains the tradition's own perspective, one that is full of confidence'.⁷⁶ This understanding of the film as reconnecting with the past is confirmed by Stephen Chow in an interview. According to the filmmaker, he decided to use elements from old Cantonese *wuxia* films because he believes that those are much neglected hidden treasures. 'When we do not regard it as something, it is nothing; but if you regard it as something, it is the real gem.' Thus he decides to go 'as local as possible' and avoid elements that are 'not local'.⁷⁷

As a member of the audience observes, what the film brings about is not merely the return of a genre in local film and popular culture but a reminder of a long forgotten martial arts spirit.⁷⁸ This person identifies martial arts spirit as representing the courage to stand up against injustice, to defend the weak, and to assist one another when in need. This corresponds to the values that the protagonist used to hold as a boy but later abandoned. The audience member laments that this kind of martial arts spirit has long been forgotten nowadays, just as the character has put aside those values, and therefore welcomes the reminder from *Kung Fu Hustle*.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Ma Ka Fai, 'The Boy who Believes in Miracles', *Mingpao Daily News*, 27 December 2004, D7.

⁷⁷ Ng Chun Hung, 'The Treasure is in the Local', D3.

⁷⁸ Ric, 'Kung Fu Hustle Continues with the Lost Martial Arts Spirits' <http://www.hkedcity.net/library/review/view.phtml?file_id=40831> [accessed 19 March 2006]. Interestingly, this audience member opines that the film's music score is already a reminder of the old martial arts spirit, because it uses the same genre of traditional music as the old Cantonese films that often exemplify this spirit.

⁷⁹ This is echoed in Duke of Aberdeen, 'Good Kung Fu' (好功夫), 8 January 2005 <<http://blog.ame.com.hk/archives/145>> [accessed 19 March 2006].

Related to the rediscovery of martial arts spirit, Ma Ka Kai observes in *Kung Fu Hustle* a spirit of non-violence and forgiveness toward the enemy that characterises old Cantonese martial arts films.⁸⁰ As he points out, the most important final achievement of the hero in those films is often not to win the fight by crushing the villain. Instead it is the repentance of the latter who is seen to kneel in front of the protagonist to beg for forgiveness, admitting his own wrongdoings and also acknowledging the moral superiority of his opponent.⁸¹ Notably the final move of Beast in *Kung Fu Hustle* is almost an exact replica of those scenes when he kneels down and weeps before the protagonist. Additionally the cinematographic treatment adds a mystic touch to the scenario by using a low angle POV of Beast, beholding the protagonist's silhouette with sun rays shining through over the shoulder. This is visually suggestive that Beast is not simply admitting his defeat by a more skilful fighter but is surrendering to the power of light. Then in the next shot the protagonist takes over Beast's secret weapon and swings it into the sky, turning it into a flower that floats in the air. This gesture of disarmament that turns a deadly weapon into a symbol of beauty also serves as a visual transition to the film's final scene. There, the audience is presented with a transformed city which is free from the threats of gangsters and the people appear to be living peacefully and happily.⁸² While this

⁸⁰ Ma Ka Fai, 'The Boy who Believes in Miracles', *Mingpao Daily News*, 27 December 2004, D7.

⁸¹ Scenes of similar sorts were so prevalent in Hong Kong Cantonese films in the 1950s and 1960s that the actor Shek Kin (石堅, also transliterated Shih Kien) who often played the villain part almost became an archetype of the villain in local popular culture, and his name had been used to stand for treacherous characters in daily language at least until the 1990s.

⁸² Whilst this renewed city appears to be an ideal place of living, the filmmaker also presents in a comical but clear manner that it is far from heavenly, as the crook who used to con the protagonist is still there, preying on another small boy.

eventual peaceful order is brought forth by series of vicious fighting, the film nonetheless maintains a posture that can be understood as basically non-violent, as it implies an acceptance of Beast's beg for pardon and does not rely on exterminating the villain to win the battle. In this manner, the conflict resolution in this film follows the tradition of old Cantonese martial arts films in both form and spirit. By so doing, *Kung Fu Hustle* reconnects the audience with another important aspect of the local memory – the spirit of forgiveness as exhibited in popular martial arts culture of an earlier period.

6D.2.2 Implications of the Traditions for Contemporary Hong Kong

While the film is regarded as reconnecting the audience with an ignored tradition, the way in which some local critics draw implications of reconnection for contemporary Hong Kong is noteworthy. For instance, in the words of Bernadette Tsui, Stephen Chow has brought a 'rebirth' to kung fu film by integrating it with a comic approach and the use of modern technology.⁸³ She affirms the filmmaker's endeavour by contrasting it with a massive project by the Hong Kong Government and says that what Chow has done is 'more significant than flirting with Guggenheim or Pompidou', meaning that the film's revitalisation of local heritage contributes more substantially to the local cultural scene than the government's ambitious but controversial plan to build a new cultural district.⁸⁴ By making this contrast, the

⁸³ Bernadette Tsui, 'Is *Kung Fu Hustle* Enjoyable?'

⁸⁴ Bernadette Tsui, 'Is *Kung Fu Hustle* Enjoyable?' Around the time of *Kung Fu Hustle*'s cinema release, Hong Kong was in the midst of a controversy over the construction of the West Kowloon Recreation and Culture District, which involved the use of a vast piece of reclamation land. The government's proposal was to commission a single commercial corporation to develop the whole project and populate the district with branches of world famous museums and galleries, including

commentator celebrates the film's reconnection to popular cultural memories by posing it as contributing to the contemporary social agenda.

More significantly, however, some commentators claim that Stephen Chow's attempts in *Kung Fu Hustle* can be a paradigm that is exemplary to Hong Kong society in its search for direction after the change of political identity. Such is the view of local sociologist Ng Chun Hung, who is also a self-confessed fan of Chow. In the conclusion to his interview with Stephen Chow, he comments that this film is 'rooted in tradition and facing the whole world', and considers it a 'relaunch of the cultural enterprise of Hong Kong in the era of globalisation'.⁸⁵

Similar perspectives are expressed in the mainline press which make use of the film for didactic purposes. In particular, as mentioned in an earlier section (6B), the editorials of two major local broadsheet papers have claimed the film as a model for Hong Kong to find its way forward in an overall desperate mood. Among them, the *Hong Kong Economic Times* emphasises Stephen Chow's choice to devote three entire years to make this carefully crafted film after the success of *Shaolin Soccer* and refuses to give in to the temptation to make quick money in the short run, which is characteristic of Hong Kong and its film industry.⁸⁶ The editorial praises Chow's

Guggenheim and Pompidou. This idea met with heated controversies among various social sectors, especially the art and cultural circles.

⁸⁵ Ng Chun Hung, 'The Treasure is in the Local', D3.

⁸⁶ 'Editorial: 'With Kung Fu Style Efforts, Hong Kong will not Die' (肯下工夫, 香港不死), *Hong Kong Economic Times*, 22 December 2004.

determination to search for transformation rather than repeating his old patterns. It further comments that if Hong Kong people can follow his example of hard work and careful attention to details, the city's economy would not die. While this commentary in the *Hong Kong Economic Times* tends to be abstract in its reference to *Kung Fu Hustle*, the editorial in *Mingpao Daily News* discusses the strength of the film in more concrete terms.⁸⁷ It echoes the observations of the critics mentioned above, saying that the film successfully digs into the treasure of purely local invention and effectively integrates old traditions with modern practices. The article considers the film as well as the whole of Hong Kong within the context of global competition, and concludes that the film 'has pointed out in concrete terms and in detail the way forward for Hong Kong to revitalise its competitiveness'.⁸⁸ Though different in emphasis, these press editorials regard the film as exemplary for Hong Kong society in its search for direction in the midst of a sense of loss after a series of social crises subsequent to the change of sovereignty. The reconnection to the remembered past as illustrated in *Kung Fu Hustle* is claimed to be pointing toward a way to the future.

6D.3 *Concluding Remarks*

In this section, I build on the discussion of *Kung Fu Hustle* being a story of Hong Kong and examine its relationship to the film's vision of hope. Corresponding to its relocation of the marginal to the centre, one aspect of the film's vision of hope is built upon the solidarity of the marginal. The portrayal of solidarity is maintained

⁸⁷ 'Editorial: Local Kung Fu Transformed and Enters the International Scene' (地道功夫變身打入國際), *Mingpao Daily News*, 16 January 2005.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

by the characterisation of the protagonist who, as the ultimate hero, emerges from essentially the same background as the marginal community. The second aspect of the vision of hope is founded on the film's nature as a story of memory. On the narrative level, the hope of the protagonist to be able to emerge with a renewed identity relies on his reconnection with his memory and his reconciliation with his own past. On the level of the cinematic project, the film is received by some as a reconnection to local popular cultural memories and values represented by the older martial arts films. Concomitantly, this reconnection with local cultural heritage is regarded by some critics and the news media as presenting an example by which Hong Kong people and society can find their way forward.

6E. Conclusion: the Relevance of *Kung Fu Hustle* for the Expressions of Christian faith in Public

In this chapter, within the analytical framework and methodology of the whole thesis, I have closely studied the text and context of *Kung Fu Hustle*, with extensive reference to accessible written comments by local audiences and critics. Although some among the audience are sceptical that Stephen Chow has betrayed his local supporters to turn to a global market, I have found that this view is not shared by the major commentators. On the contrary, the film is widely regarded as an important tribute to the martial arts tradition in local cinematic and popular culture. Enthusiastic responses from the media and local academics have reaffirmed the iconic status of Stephen Chow in local popular culture. By scrutinising *Kung Fu Hustle* as a cinema project as well as reviewing writings of critics and audience, I have also

found that the film's messages are communicated on two levels – both within the story itself and also in the practice of the project. This refers to the film's subversion of the conventional hierarchical ordering of centre and margin by locating the marginal at the centre of events, and also to its nature as a story of memory. In both of these key dimensions of the film as a story of Hong Kong, the relocation of the marginal and the narrative of memory are not only discernible in the storyline but also evidenced in the overall creative and production decisions. On the basis of these dimensions, the film presents its vision of hope which involves, first, the solidarity of the marginal, and second, the reconnection with memory. In *Kung Fu Hustle*, this reconnection with memory points toward rebuilding the link to an aspect in the heritage of local popular culture which, as some critics point out, is an important though hidden part of the collective memory of the people.

As such, *Kung Fu Hustle* is a continuation and further elaboration of *Shaolin Soccer* in terms of thematic concerns.⁸⁹ In the previous film, Stephen Chow has put forth the vision of integrating the new into the old, which means the old tradition is to be renewed through incorporating compatible new elements rather than being forgotten and discarded. In the present film, he goes further to actually dig into a tradition in local popular culture (the old Cantonese martial arts film) and tries to inject new life into it by bringing it up to date against the odds, since the tradition he

⁸⁹ Though from the same filmmaker, almost none of the audience members and critics I reviewed have discussed the thematic relationship between the two films beyond the obvious fact that they are both kung fu comedies.

tabs into is considered by some as being outmoded and unfamiliar.⁹⁰ As a result, some of the audience and critical responses acknowledge that the film has revived the old and almost forgotten tradition. In other words, this film has been understood by them as a practical realisation of what the filmmaker has advocated in his previous work.

My main concern in this study is to identify the challenges and insights that the film may offer to the expression of Christian faith in public. As with *Infernal Affairs* and *Shaolin Soccer*, *Kung Fu Hustle* is not a piece of theological work per se; nor is it a flawless aesthetic achievement. In this thesis, it is examined as a cultural text which reveals a certain aspect of its context of production and reception, and which can inform endeavours in Christian praxis. From this perspective, a number of points can be noted, such as the film's somewhat non-violent resolution toward the end, the aspirations for a heaven-like reconstructed city after the final confrontation, as well as the whole film project as praxis of the story's message. Nonetheless, I shall confine myself to two major aspects here, which I consider most pertinent to the concern of this study.

The first aspect is the film's subversive gesture to relocate the marginal at the centre. As this is consistently executed through the storyline and the casting, the film affirms the primary importance of those driven to the margin. Instead of being

⁹⁰ It is revealing that even the action choreographer Yuen Wo-ping said that initially he did not know how to work on the style of the old Cantonese films and was quite shocked by Chow's requests. Source: *The Making of Kung Fu Hustle* (Columbia Pictures Asia, 2004).

the negligible nobody or the unseen other, the film puts them at centre stage. The film's focus on the excluded interrogates the expressions of faith by Hong Kong churches, which often not only focus on the centre but even reinforce their established power. It should be emphasised that adopting the perspective of the marginal is not merely an ad hoc tactic for communicating certain messages, but is a 'social location'⁹¹ that Christian media practitioners and the church in Hong Kong must take seriously in the present era after the change of sovereignty. This is because of the increasing sense of anxiety of the city becoming marginalised as a whole, a point which I have already discussed in Chapter Five. When Stephen Chow's previous film *Shaolin Soccer* was released in 2001, the fear of marginalisation expressed in that film was yet a hidden feeling among many in Hong Kong. In the period during and after *Kung Fu Hustle* was on screen, although the people's confidence over the city's future was steadily on the increase and the overall mood of the population was apparently improving,⁹² the issue of being marginalised was also becoming more noticeable in the social agenda. In face of the altered socio-political and economic situation, which demand a corresponding 'refashioning' in the 'geography of faith',⁹³ perspectives from the margin are no longer avertable.

⁹¹ I borrow this term from Joerg Rieger's discussion on doing theology from the margin in his *God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 188. I shall come back to this notion of the 'social location' of theology in the next chapter.

⁹² See the reports of ongoing public opinion polls conducted by the Public Opinion Programme at the University of Hong Kong:
<http://hkupop.hku.hk/english/popexpress/trust/conhkfuture/combine/chart/chart1.gif>
 [accessed 1 December 2007].

⁹³ This concept is inspired by James Cochrane, *Circles of Dignity: Community Wisdom and Theological Reflection* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 166.

The second important aspect is the film's orientation toward past tradition in local culture. As I have discussed throughout the chapter, the film indeed engages extensively with various aspects of the memory of many people in Hong Kong, particularly the way of living and the popular culture they used to consume. It is true that there is the nostalgic tendency among local critics and audience to idealise the past in their discussions of *Kung Fu Hustle*. It is also true that popular expressions of faith by Hong Kong Christians have seldom taken local traditions and history seriously. As I have discussed in Chapter Three, the Christian films display a general disregard for local heritage and contemporary circumstances. The engagement with local cultural traditions in *Kung Fu Hustle*, therefore, serves as a reminder that these are not to be overlooked, as they constitute an important portion of the context of the expressions of Christian faith.

In this and the two preceding chapters, I have analysed three Hong Kong films that have topped the local box office between 2001 and 2004 for the purpose of identifying insights and challenges that can be used to interrogate the contemporary practice of the public expressions of faith by local Christians. In the next chapter I shall systematically review what I have identified as pertinent to the issue in question, and propose a contextual approach to the expression of Christian faith in the public arena. This is to be undertaken in accordance with my tripolar approach to theological construction which I have articulated in the first chapter.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion:

Toward a Contextual Theological Approach to Expressions of Christian Faith in the Public Realm

7A. Introduction

This final chapter of the thesis is a proposal for a contextual theological approach to expressions of Christian faith in the public arena in contemporary Hong Kong, particularly through popular audiovisual media. This is a culmination of findings from textual and contextual film analyses throughout the previous chapters, in which I have studied in detail the most representative popular Hong Kong films produced and released in the early years of the twenty first century. These include the *Infernal Affairs Trilogy* (Chapter Four), *Shaolin Soccer* (Chapter Five), and *Kung Fu Hustle* (Chapter Six).

To begin articulating this proposal, I shall first lay down a constructive integration of the main points of the insights previously identified over the course of film analyses. Then I shall highlight the basic orientation of theological construction for this project, which I have discussed in detail in the introductory chapter. Subsequently on the basis of these, I shall elaborate on the major features of this contextual approach to the expression of Christian faith, which is constructed with local insights from within the Hong Kong context and also specifically targeted at the contemporary Hong Kong situation. As will be seen later in the chapter, this proposed approach confronts local Christians to be more attentive and humble

toward local cultural-religious traditions, to relocate their social positions to the margin, and to embrace the real-life circumstances of the people, which I suggest is a liminal condition in contemporary Hong Kong after the reversion to Chinese sovereignty. As such, this proposed approach is a radical challenge to the prevailing practice of expressions of faith by local Christians, including some of the existing efforts in their filmmaking.

7B. Insights from Popular Hong Kong Cinema:

a Constructive Integration

As the starting point for proposing a contextual theology of the expressions of Christian faith in public, in this section I shall provide a systematic review and constructive synthesis of what has been discovered in the previous chapters concerning relevant lessons learnt from the films. Throughout Chapters Four to Six, I undertook a detailed analysis of the most popular recent Hong Kong films individually, and concluded each chapter with the insights and challenges that each film could offer to the expression of Christian faith in the popular media. As a result of an overview of the chapters, two main categories of insights from the films emerge. The first category unveils the nature of the relationship between the popular cinema and the socio-cultural context of its creation; it is thus concerned with the question of *how* – How do these films connect with the original social circumstances in which they are produced and received? The second category focuses on the key thematic concerns of the films as cultural texts, and answers the question of *what* – What do these films tell about the socio-cultural context of their production and reception? Both of these aspects are crucial for constructing a practical and

contextual approach to Christian theological expression in public. I shall elaborate on each of these categories below.

7B.1. *How does the Popular Cinema Connect with the Context?*

The first category of insights from the popular films reveals *how* these films connect with the seedbed from which they are born, namely the contemporary Hong Kong society. They unveil the nature of the interrelationship between the local popular cinema and the social ethos. As I shall point out in the course of discussion, each item referred to below bears significance for developing a contextual theology for the expressions of Christian faith, and they will be explored in more detail in a later section (7D).

In the first place, my study reveals that these local films tell the stories of the people and address some of the fundamental issues that are confronting a considerable portion of the population. My analysis of the *Infernal Affairs Trilogy*, *Shaolin Soccer*, and *Kung Fu Hustle* find that all of them, in one way or another, can be regarded as parabolic representations of the circumstances of contemporary Hong Kong people. More importantly, as my review of writings by local critics and audience indicates, the films are claimed and owned by many of them as telling certain aspects of their own stories in the altered social situation after 1997. In other words, for Hong Kong people in the era after the change of sovereignty, these films are perceived to be in touch with what Raymond Williams calls the 'structure of feeling', which is the dominant idea, the totality, that is expressed in works of art from a specific period, and is 'only realisable through experience of the work of art

itself, as a whole'.¹ The details of these fundamental issues, which concern the actual content of this structure of feeling, is to be discussed in the immediately following subsection in which I explore *what* these films reveal about the circumstances of contemporary Hong Kong people.

In the course of telling the people's stories, the films take their popular religiosity and cultural traditions seriously, and also regard the legacy of local heritage with proper respect. For example, *Infernal Affairs* appeals extensively to the popular form of Chinese Buddhist motifs, which have been widely accepted in Hong Kong as part of the local culture. Even the film's original Chinese title *Wujiandao* is itself adapted from the Buddhist notion of the incessant hell. Likewise, in its basic creative design *Shaolin Soccer* also appeals to the popular recognition and imagination of Shaolin monks and their martial arts, which has long been part of the local folk culture and commonly regarded as an important strand in the cultural tradition. While *Kung Fu Hustle* takes a different turn as it contains no explicit religious references, it refers extensively to a closely related aspect in the local cultural tradition – namely the legacy of popular martial arts fictions in the forms of the novel and cinema, which is often considered an inherent constituent in the daily culture of Hong Kong common folk and is also closely tied with Chinese folk religious sensibilities. Such extensive appeal to popular religiosity and cultural traditions informs the construction of a contextual theology of the expressions of Christian faith to be more sensitive to these aspects in the society – a point which I

1 Raymond Williams, *Preface to Film* (1954); republished as 'Film and the Dramatic Tradition', in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, edited by John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 33. Elsewhere Williams has also described 'structure of feeling' as about the intangible 'elements of impulse, restraint and tone' and the 'specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships' (*Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, 132).

shall elaborate in a later section.

In addition to the sensitivity toward cultural and religious traditions, the films exhibit an unabashed identification with the underprivileged and the marginal, particularly in the case of the two films of Stephen Chow. Among them, *Shaolin Soccer* is essentially a story of how a group of marginalised people struggle to survive in a society from which they are displaced. *Kung Fu Hustle* goes beyond telling a story of the marginal and takes one step further by relocating the marginal to the centre of events – not merely within the story but also through the practice of the whole film project. In a different sense, this identification with the marginal is also evidenced in *Infernal Affairs*. By focusing on two moles who are opposite of each other, the film not only digs into their inner worlds but also assumes their points of view as characters who live at the margin of what is commonly known and accepted in the society's mainstream. This affinity to the marginal displayed in the cinema interrogates Christian expressions of faith to reconsider their social location which, as I shall point out later, is presently more affiliated with the centre of socio-economic power.

Closely related to this identification with the marginal is an acceptance of human weaknesses exhibited in the films. All the major characters in the films, apart from being marginal and underprivileged, are flawed human beings rather than noble heroes. In *Infernal Affairs*, the undercover police officer, while bearing the traits of a tragic hero, is violent and verbally abusive, whereas the mole from the gang is obsessed with self-interest to the extent of becoming insane. The Shaolin brothers in

Shaolin Soccer are greedy, vulgar, and often resort to violence. The protagonist in *Kung Fu Hustle*, before transforming into becoming the ultimate hero, is merely an opportunistic loser who bullies and tries to take advantage of those around him. Rather than being critical of what they do, the films instead celebrate them as who they are, and thereby present an embracing posture that accommodates the dark side of normal humans. This, again, serves as a reminder to Christians to consider a more accepting position toward human weakness in their expressions of faith in public.

In short, the films that I study are the stories of Hong Kong in the sense that they are representations of the circumstances of the society and its people in the era after the change of sovereignty. Additionally, in their endeavour of telling different facets of the Hong Kong stories, these films take seriously the cultural and religious traditions that are close to the local people. At the same time, they adopt a position which sides with the marginal, and they also exhibit an acceptance of human weaknesses. In comparison, as shown in Chapter Three, these qualities are lacking from the films produced by local Christian groups during the same period. In this regard, then, the popular cinema poses a challenge to the expressions of Christian faith in public. In a later section (7D), I shall propose in more detail how these challenges from the popular films inform the basic features of the contextual theology under construction.

7B.2. *What does the Popular Cinema Reveal about its Sociocultural Context?*

Whilst the first category of insights discussed above reveal that the films are in fact telling the stories of the place and its people, the second category focuses on

the thematic aspect of the films and identifies what they reveal about the situation of contemporary Hong Kong people and their society. From my critical textual and contextual analysis of the films, four major issues of concern are found to be dominant – namely the enigma of unresolved identity, the tension between remembering and forgetting, the anxiety over marginalisation, and the quest for transformation. The identification of these issues by no means implies that they are the only issues with which Hong Kong people are concerned over the period in question. Nonetheless their ubiquity in the popular cinema and the claim of the audience that these films are telling their stories suggest that they are of fundamental importance to many people. In my attempt to engage theologically with the popular cinema, these interrelated issues are not to be ignored and I shall highlight them one by one in the following pages.

7B.2.1 The Enigma of Unresolved Identity

The first issue which emerges consistently in the films examined in this study is the question of identity. While it is conspicuous in all three films, the theme is most fully elaborated and represented in *Infernal Affairs*. As a story of police and gangster both undercover, the whole plot of this film is basically a play on identity. Both of the central characters are entangled in deep identity crises as they are living lives in disguise on a daily basis. While one wants to discard his original gangster identity and assume the disguised police identity as his real one, the other one tries hard to leave the role of the mole and resume his real police identity. In *Shaolin Soccer*, the Shaolin brothers are confronted with a serious crisis in material survival and regard their Shaolin background as the obstacle which hinders them in moving

on in life. This crisis of survival is so serious that at one point many of them renounce and curse their core identity as Shaolin disciples. This rejection of one's own identity also appears in *Kung Fu Hustle*, in which the protagonist tries to turn against his childhood calling but later re-encounters the deaf girl who confronts him with who he really should be. In this sense *Kung Fu Hustle* is about the rediscovery of one's true identity and also the reconciliation with that original identity which was once denied. This is an interesting contrast to *Infernal Affairs*, in which both central characters relentlessly reject their unwanted identities to the very end.

The narrative of identity in all three films points to a state of mind that is beyond a mere puzzle or uncertainty over one's identity. They depict the protagonists' intentional escape from or rejection of their original identities in desperation. It is a sense of unresolved restlessness which cuts through the films. This prevalent representation of identity crisis in the popular cinema suggests that it is an important issue that confronts the people of Hong Kong in the early years of the twenty first century. This observation corresponds with the findings of a study by Ma and Fung, who offer a review of major researches on the issue of identity of Hong Kong people from 1996 to 2006.² They find that during that decade, although Hong Kong people's perception of the Hong Kong-mainland sharp distinction is disappearing, the tension between the national identity of Chinese-ness and local

2 Eric K.W. Ma and Anthony Y.H. Fung, 'Negotiating Local and National Identifications: Hong Kong Identity Surveys 1996-2006', *Asian Journal of Communication* 17.2 (2007): 172-185. For their earlier study on this subject, see: Eric K.W. Ma and Anthony Y.H. Fung, 'Resinicization, Nationalism and the Hong Kong Identity', in *Press and Politics in Hong Kong: Case Studies from 1967 to 1997*, ed. Clement So and Joseph Chan (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute for Asia-Pacific Studies, 1999), 497-528. For a most recent full-scale and multi-dimensional discussion on the issue, see: Gordon Matthews, Eric Ma, and Lui Tai-lok, *Hong Kong, China: Learning to Belong to a Nation* (London: Routledge, 2008).

identity of Hong Kong-ness is still unresolved. In other words, during the period of transition in political sovereignty, the identities of residents of the city are fluid. The prominent representation of this identity enigma in the cultural texts suggests its fundamental significance to the people and thus demands to be taken seriously in Christian theological expression in public. Hence the issue is to be picked up again as I propose a contextual theology for the expressions of faith.

7B.2.2 The Tension of Retaining and Foregoing Memory

Another thematic element which emerges constantly in the films is the tension between remembering and forgetting. Among them, the most prominent and explicit narrative of memory is found in *Kung Fu Hustle*, which is essentially a project built around the concept of memory. It is not only the key element upon which the story is constructed but also an integral part of the core message and primary appeal of the film. On the narrative level, it is the protagonist's rejection of his undesirable memory of preceding events that triggers the main events in the film; and the main turning point occurs as a result of the protagonist's reconnection with his past. On the level of the film's creative concept, the project connects the local audience to some of the shared memories from the past, such as the legacy of the Cantonese martial arts cinema from the mid twentieth century and the solidarity in old communities that have vanished in the course of urban development. Most notably, both within its storyline and its creative strategy of appealing to recent local socio-cultural history, *Kung Fu Hustle* communicates a message that the hope for a better future lies in reconnecting with the past and rejuvenating the neglected heritage. In this regard, the film is a thematic continuation, elaboration, and even

actualisation of *Shaolin Soccer*, which advocates the reinvigoration of old tradition by synthesising it with new ingredients.

Though the theme of memory in *Shaolin Soccer* is not as conspicuous as in *Kung Fu Hustle*, it is nonetheless a significant dramatic component in the film. For the Shaolin cohorts, the cherished memory of their brotherhood in the temple is the key factor that rekindles their solidarity to form the football team. The team, in turn, is instrumental in reinvigorating the Shaolin tradition they represent and also in transforming their socio-economic destiny. In other words, memory is represented in *Shaolin Soccer* as potentially redemptive as it is the motivating force for the characters to turn away from their desperations and strive to change their course of life. This positive treatment of memory in the two films of Stephen Chow is almost the direct opposite of *Infernal Affairs*, in which memory is basically represented as a haunting ghost from the past. Although it is a strong motivating force behind the characters, it is a negative motivation. It is often presented as a dark corner from which the characters try to escape or as psychological obsessions which they cannot evade. The actions of the characters are often reactions to their own memory-ghosts.

These polarised representations of memory in the cultural texts point toward the complex and ambivalent attitude on the part of Hong Kong people in this regard, which is in essence a tension between retaining and foregoing their connection to the recent past. Whereas some consider certain aspects of this past to be a burden that should better be rid of, others regard those elements as legacies to be preserved.³

³ In his recent reflection on issues related to life after the reversion of sovereignty, Hong Kong theologian Kung Lap Yan (龔立人) disapprovingly laments, 'There are always people in our

This ambivalence inferred from the cultural texts resonates with what have been called 'the two waves of collective memory' that span across more than a decade, first in the eve of the sovereignty handover and then on the eve of its tenth anniversary.⁴ In the recent wave which started in late 2006, there are heated debates and social actions over the preservation of the city's cultural heritage and collective memory.⁵ When considered together, the prevalence of the tension over memory in the films and the discussions on collective memory in the society indicate that it is one of the significant issues in the Hong Kong context. It thus demands serious attention in this endeavour in contextual theology.

7B.2.3 The Anxiety of Marginalisation

A third thematic concern that is expressed throughout all the films is the

society who want to wipe out the memories from the colonial days. ... They regard these memories as obstacles to establishing new identities.' From: Kung Lap Yan, 'Preface', in *Post 97 Dream Life of Hong Kong: Memory, Symbols, and Space* (後九七香港夢幻生活：回憶、符號與空間) (Hong Kong: Voice, 2007), iv.

- 4 As local sociologist and cultural commentator Ng Chun Hung (吳俊雄, a.k.a. Leung Foon 梁款) points out, an earlier wave of collective memory has occurred in Hong Kong before 1997, and then in the period around the tenth anniversary of the sovereignty change there is what he calls the second wave of collective memory, during which time the term has become a tag phrase. See: Leung Foon(梁款), 'The Second Wave of Collective Memory' (集體回憶第二波), in *Hong Kong Economic Times*, 22 January 2007, 28.
- 5 According to Leung (*ibid.*), this second wave is triggered by the Star Ferry Pier incident in late 2006, which is a reaction to the government's decision to continue with its plan to demolish certain popular landmarks for urban development, despite increasing voices of opposition. In the evening of 12 November 2006, as many as 150,000 people gathered at the waterfront of the Central District to bid farewell to the Star Ferry Pier on its last day of service before demolition, claiming that the place carried decades of collective memories of many local people. In December, when demolition work began, there were violent confrontations between the police and the activists who attempted to stop the pier from being torn down. Then in summer 2007, when the government prepared to demolish the adjacent Queen's Pier, series of debates over the appropriateness of this work were held by the media, by activist groups, and within the Legislative Council. On the official side, the government also tried to present itself as taking local collective memory seriously and announced the plan for building a digital archive under the name of the 'Hong Kong Memory Project'. (Source: Speech by Secretary for Home Affairs on 'Hong Kong Memory Project', Hong Kong Government Information Service press release, 14 February 2007 <<http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/200702/14/P200702140206.htm>> [accessed 12 September 2007]).

anxiety of being marginalised. This is most vividly and elaborately represented in *Shaolin Soccer*, in which the whole football team is made up of members who are marginalised in the changed social circumstances. This portrayal is picked up by many in the local audience as a reflection of their own anxieties and frustrations. *Kung Fu Hustle* goes beyond merely representing the fear of marginalisation by offering its subversive narrative which relocates the marginal to the centre, both in its story and in its approach to casting. Through this subversive endeavour the film challenges the conventional notion of centre and margin by suggesting that what is commonly overlooked as peripheral and negligible might in fact be playing substantial roles in the community. Although the storyline and characterisation in *Infernal Affairs* do not involve direct or explicit representation of marginalisation as in the films of Stephen Chow, such anxiety is nonetheless embedded and implied in the motivations of the two main characters. The two moles' rejection of continuous life in the underworld reflects their unwillingness to live at the margin of the society and their longing to gain acceptance in what they regard as the decent normal society, that is, the centre.

In these films, the anxiety over marginalisation is represented either in concrete terms of socio-economic status or intangible terms of psychological motive to disown one's identity. The pervasiveness of these representations indicates the pertinence of the issue for the local audience and society. Also, what emerges from the film is consistent with continuous contextual observations on the Hong Kong society, such as ongoing discussions of the issue of marginalisation in the local press.⁶ Henceforth, the issue itself as well as the cinematic treatment of it demand

⁶ See especially Chapter 5 for details.

serious attention in the construction of contextual theology.

7B.2.4 The Quest for Transformation from Unwanted Situations

Yet another theme that recurs in the popular cinema is the main characters' quest for transformation from unwanted situations. Though manifested in divergent ways, such a quest is the key component in the plot lines of both *Infernal Affairs* and *Shaolin Soccer*, and is also an underlying thread which carries through the whole narrative in *Kung Fu Hustle*. In *Infernal Affairs*, the story of the whole trilogy is built around the effort of the two moles to transform their unwanted identities but both end up in tragic failure. In the case of the Shaolin brothers, there are two dimensions involved in their quest for transformation: there is the strive to transform the Shaolin tradition in the modern world, and the urge to transform their personal destinies for material survival. While the protagonist in *Kung Fu Hustle* does not consciously seek transformation and has even suppressed this drive in himself, it is inherent in the most crucial turning point in the narrative, which portrays the protagonist's metamorphic transformation from an ordinary person into the invincible master near the end of the story.

As such, the motif of transformation from unwanted situations emerges as a common thread which cuts through all three films being studied. They point to a common longing for renewal in identity which is closely tied to the yearning for a change of fate. From the ubiquity of these representations in the cultural texts, it can be inferred that the quest for transformation is indeed actively at work in the post

1997 era among a considerable part of the Hong Kong population. Moreover, the fact that this quest is consistently related to the problem of identity in the films further suggests that behind the transformation urge in real life there is a consciousness to redefine identity, which corresponds to the change in political sovereignty. Hence, alongside the enigma of unresolved identity, the tension between retaining and abandoning memory, as well as the fear of marginalisation, the quest for transformation is another fundamental issue that is to be addressed in a contextual theology of the expressions of Christian faith.

7B.3 *Concluding Remarks*

In this section I have reviewed the insights drawn from the popular cinema that have been identified in the previous chapters. One category of these involves the close connectedness of the popular cinema with its temporal-spatial context. The cinema's most significant character in this regard is that it is perceived as telling the stories of the people and their society, and when doing so it takes seriously local popular religiosity and cultural traditions. At the same time, it often displays an identification with the marginal while also expressing an acceptance toward the weaknesses in human nature.

Another category of insights from the cinema highlights the recurring issues that emerge consistently in the films, which I identify as the enigma of unresolved identity, the tension of retaining or abandoning past memory, the fear of marginalisation, and the quest for transformation. Although they may appear to be distinct from one another, there are in fact intertwining relationships among them. In

the films, the characters' quest for transformation is the manifestation of their urge to discard their perceived undesirable identities, an urge which is itself a product of their anxieties of marginalisation. The transformation quest is therefore negatively related to the issues of identity and marginalisation. Concomitantly, the transformation quest is positively related to memory – it is often memory of the past that becomes a resource or cause for the protagonists to move forward. As the films are understood as representations of certain facets of the society, a holistic perspective on the issues also regards them as interlocking dimensions of a larger overriding circumstance that encompasses the people of Hong Kong at the beginning of the century. This circumstance is in essence an uncertain and insecure state of prolonged liminality.⁷ In cultural anthropology, liminality refers to the middle stage in a ritual in which the participants have cast aside their original identities but not yet fully assumed the new identities. Borrowing from this notion, the circumstances of the people of Hong Kong in the years after the reversion of political sovereignty can also be described as 'betwixt and between' two states,⁸ and is analogous to those who are in the middle stage of a ritual. As local social scientist Anthony Cheung recently observes in a short essay, Hong Kong in the era after the sovereignty handover is in need of redefining itself as a society, and the restlessness and uncertainties in the early years of this century indicate the lack of success in this regard.⁹ In the language of liminality, the people and society of Hong Kong are entangled in a

7 I am indebted to Mr Huang Enlin, my postgraduate colleague in the School of Divinity, Edinburgh University, for drawing my attention to the concept of liminality and suggesting its possible relevance to theological endeavours.

8 Victor Turner, 'Variations on a Theme of Liminality', in *Secular Ritual*, ed. Sally Falk Moore and Barbara G. Meyerhoff (Assen: Uitgeverij Van Gorcum, 1977), 36-52.

9 Anthony B.L. Cheung (張炳良) 'Defining Hong Kong, Constructing Identity' (定義香港, 建立身分), in *Mingpao Daily News*, 19 September 2007, Forum Page.

prolonged liminal state and have not yet been able to arrive at or construct their new identity. In my contextual theological construction, this collective liminality of the people and their society is to be taken into serious account and will therefore be further elaborated when I map out my proposed contextual approach to expression of Christian faith in the next section.

7C. A Contextual Approach to Expressions of Christian Faith in Public

With the insights from the popular cinema which I have constructively integrated above, in the present section I put forth a contextual theological approach to the public expressions of Christian faith. This contextual approach is characterised by three main features – attentiveness and humility to local cultural-religious traditions, relocation to the margin, and embrace of the contingent liminality of the people. While these features correspond closely to insights from the cinema, they are by no means strictly bound by the latter. Although my proposed contextual theology builds on the lessons learnt from the films, it also keeps a necessary critical distance from them and seeks to go beyond the cinematic visions, which are themselves limited by their sociocultural and political-economic confines. In addition, it should also be emphasised that I do not intend in this thesis to offer a complete or comprehensive theological system. Instead, as pointed out in my introductory chapter, the theological construction in this project is defined by three equally important pillars, namely, being practical, contextual, and cultural.¹⁰

¹⁰ For details of this practical, contextual, and cultural approach to theology, see Chapter 1 Section D: 'A Tripolar Approach to Theology'.

Two further points need to be made before I go into the details. First, the proposal here is intended to be one approach that can be adopted by local church communities, among other possible alternatives; it is not meant to be *the* only legitimate approach to the expressions of faith for contemporary Hong Kong Christians. Second, this proposal is a pointer that suggests the direction for local Christian praxis; it is not intended to provide the full scale content of a comprehensive action guideline for practitioners or a complete theological framework in this regard. Those attempts would be the tasks of other further projects beyond the scope of the present one. That being said, it is nonetheless my purpose in this endeavour to provide an adequate basis for Christians in Hong Kong to engage in critical self-reflection concerning their expressions of faith in public.

7C.1. *Attentiveness and Humility to Local Cultural-Religious Traditions*

The first feature of my contextual approach is attentiveness and humility to cultural-religious traditions of the people. As I have pointed out, one of the main characteristics of Hong Kong popular cinema that challenges local Christian expressions of faith is its extensive reference to local cultural-religious traditions and sentiments. What is represented on screen is to a large extent the manifestation of traditional folk religion of southern China, which is a synthesis of popularised versions of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. As studies on religion in Hong Kong indicate, this syncretic form of popular religion is commonly practised by many local residents and is essentially embedded in the daily lives and values of the majority.¹¹ In other words, the references and appeals to cultural-religious tradition

11 May M. Cheng and Wong Siu-lun, 'Religious Convictions and Sentiments', in *Indicators of Social Development: Hong Kong 1995*, ed. Lau Siu-kai *et al.* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1997), 299-329; C. Harry Hui, 'Religious

in the popular cinema merely reflects the condition of the people. The same sensitivity, however, is often found to be lacking in Christian media practices as well as theological practices of the wider Christian communities in Hong Kong. In the language of contextual theology, the attitude of many Hong Kong Christians to local folk religion corresponds to what Schreiter calls the 'elitist approach' to popular religion.¹² This can partly be explained by the fact that in Hong Kong, Christianity has historically enjoyed a privileged status above the other religions because of the policy of the colonial government. In the era after the reversion of sovereignty, however, the churches gradually find themselves in an altered situation in which their long-held privileges are no more.

In his study on the changing public roles of different religions in Hong Kong during the period of political transition, Kwong Chunwah suggests that before and after the change of sovereignty there is an emerging interaction of religious pluralism,¹³ as other major Chinese religious traditions have also gained equal footing in their roles in society and the minority status of Christians has since become more obvious. This remark is echoed by theologian-historian Leung Ka-lun, who emphasises in his commentary on the condition of Hong Kong Christianity that Christians are a minority in the society and should thus maintain an appropriate 'mentality of minoritarianism', rather than assuming to enjoy a majority role which

and Supernaturalistic Beliefs', in *Indicators of Social Development: Hong Kong 1988*, ed. Lau Siu-kai *et al.* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1991), 103-142.

12 Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1985).

13 Chunwah Kwong, *The Public Role of Religion in Post-colonial Hong Kong* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

has never truly existed.¹⁴ In fact, similar critiques against the church holding onto colonial privileges had already been issued in the 1990s by different Christian leaders and scholars, who called for the major denominations to review their close relationship with the government, which they believed had undermined the church's prophetic role in the society.¹⁵

While these writings quoted above are mainly concerned with church-state relationship and the social role of the churches, there is in fact an even more fundamental aspect that is at stake which has important implications for the practical, contextual, and cultural concerns in the theological construction of this study. In terms of the practical dimension of theological expression in public, the lack of sensitivity of being a minority religion, together with the related lack of attentiveness to the religious values and practices of the majority, could have an alienating effect on the general public. For instance, certain media and cinema projects by Christians could be perceived by fellow citizens as being insensitive and aggressive, especially when they betray a patronising attitude toward folk religious practices, as in the case of some Christian films discussed in Chapter Three. This could result in deepening alienation between Christian groups and the people with whom they intend to communicate and thereby defeats the purpose of their expressions of faith.

14 Leung Ka-lun, *Minority and Minoritarianism* (Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary, 2002).

15 Such views have been expressed, among others, by Kwok Nai-wang (then Director of the Hong Kong Christian Institute) in *Hong Kong 1997: A Christian Perspective* (Hong Kong: Christian Institute, 1991); and Lo Lung-Kwong (director of the Divinity School of Chung Chi College, Chinese University of Hong Kong) in *Reflection in Our Times* (時代浪潮中的反思)(Hong Kong: Hong Kong Christian Institute, 1997).

In terms of cultural and contextual theological concern, the lack of serious attention to local cultural-religious traditions often means that the latter are overlooked in local theological endeavours and excluded from consideration. Exclusion as such, whether conscious or not, could result in self-induced limitations when engaging with some important resources for local theology. This would mean a negation of the recent attempts by some theologians from East Asia who advocate and endeavour in that direction. Peter C. Phan, for instance, emphasises that religious traditions, philosophies, and cultures in Asia should be extensively used as legitimate resources in the construction of Christian theologies in context.¹⁶ In fact, as Phan also points out, this cause has already been taken up by a number of theologians who originate from the continent, including East Asia.¹⁷ In light of this, to set aside local cultural-religious traditions as irrelevant to the expression and reflection of Christian faith is merely to lose a rich pool of resources and could lead to a deficiency in the expressions of faith by the local churches.

In the current era of being part of China, when local churches can no longer rely on the colonial privileges from the past, it is mandatory for Hong Kong Christians to learn to be conscious of their minority identity and be attentive to the

16 Peter C. Phan, 'Doing Theology in the Context of Cultural and Religious Pluralism: an Asian Perspective', *Louvain Studies* 27(2002)1:39-68, see especially pp. 54-57 on this point. See also his *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2003).

17 A well known East Asian effort in this regard is 'third eye theology' proposed by C.S. Song (Taiwanese American) in the 1970s. Some recent examples include the effort by Jung Young Lee (Korean American) to use *Yijing (I-Ching)* to enrich Christian theological understanding (See: Jung Young Lee, *Embracing Change: Postmodern Interpretation of I Ching from a Christian Perspective*, Scranton, Pennsylvania: University of Scranton Press, 1994); cross-textual hermeneutics between the Bible and classical Chinese texts by Archie C.C. Lee (Hong Kong) (See: Archie Lee, 'Cross-Textual Hermeneutics on Gospel and Culture', *Asia Journal of Theology* 10.1 (1996); and also postcolonial Asian feminist theology by Kwok Pui-lan (Chinese American) (See: Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, London: SCM, 2005).

cultural-religious traditions prevalent in the wider society. As Phan suggests in the title of one of his recent books, the challenge for Asian Christians nowadays is 'being religious interreligiously'.¹⁸ Implicated in this self awareness and attentiveness is a new kind of humility toward local traditions that has often been lacking among local Christians. The importance of this humility is two-fold. Practically and strategically, it contributes to establishing and strengthening rapport between churches and the majority of the people. Theologically, it could entail the enrichment of Christian reflection and expressions of faith. On these two counts, Christian humility toward local cultural-religious traditions is therefore essential to the praxis of the public expressions of faith.

7C.2. *Social Relocation to the Margin*

The second feature in my contextual approach is the relocation of the expressions of Christian faith to the margin. I have pointed out earlier that a distinctive character of the films analysed in this study is their unabashed identification with the underdog and those struggling for survival at the margin of the seemingly affluent city. As suggested in my previous discussions, this is a manifestation of the self-perception of many Hong Kong people in recent years that the city is being pushed to a peripheral position in the map of the rapid economic development of China. Concomitantly, it also echoes the socio-economic reality of the society itself. According to a document issued in 2004 by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service,¹⁹ more people are living in poverty in the early twenty

18 Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2004), title.

19 'Growing Seriousness in Poverty and Income Disparity: Poverty Situation in Hong Kong' (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Council of Social Service, September 2004).

first century than a decade earlier whilst the gap between the rich and the poor has also widened. The same document also points out that this worsening situation of poverty results in more people, especially many children, youths, and elderly people from low income families being excluded from full participation in normal social life in the community.²⁰ In other words, in contemporary Hong Kong marginalisation is both a prevailing self-perception on a collective level as well as a reality of life for many. At work behind these are the dynamics of China as a burgeoning economic giant intertwined with the forces of global market capitalism.

Under these circumstances, the cinematic manifestation of the self perception of Hong Kong people and the society's socio-economic reality confronts the expressions of Christian faith in both practical and contextual theological dimensions. In terms of praxis, it is a challenge to the basic orientation of Christian communication among the poor and marginal, as it implicates the use of the language and aesthetics of the grassroots and also implies a more accepting attitude toward human weaknesses and limitations, as my analysis of the popular cinema has demonstrated. This challenge not only demands the adoption of the language of a subculture with which many in the church are unfamiliar or even uncomfortable because of their middle class background. In essence it calls for alterations to the thought pattern of the privileged centre, to which many local Christians are

20 The poverty rate of Hong Kong has risen from 11.2% in 1991 to 18% in 2002. (Poverty rate refers to proportion of population living under the poverty line, which is defined as having household income equal to or less than half of the median domestic income of corresponding household size.) The problem is even more acute among the young and the elderly, with 25.5% of children under 14 and 32.6% of senior citizens living in low-income households. Regarding the rich-poor gap, the Gini Coefficient which measures income disparity rose from 0.451 in 1981 to 0.518 in 1996 to 0.525 in 2001 (a larger figure closer to 1.00 indicates a wider gap). Source: 'Growing Seriousness in Poverty and Income Disparity: Poverty Situation in Hong Kong' (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Council of Social Service, September 2004).

accustomed due to the church's privileged background in the colonial past.

On a deeper level of contextual theological construction, these cinematic representations and the corresponding social reality confront Christians to consider the notion that such social exclusion is a theological problem in addition to being a social problem.²¹ In the first place, it comes as a reminder that in the Judeo-Christian tradition, both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scriptures portray God as the God of the poor and oppressed, of those who are displaced to the margin and excluded from full participation in the community.²² At the same time, it challenges the church to reconsider the 'social location' from which expressions of faith are made.²³ In the face of a worsening economic divide in Hong Kong, as well as the perceived marginalisation of the city as a whole, local theology and its expression are challenged to step out of its secure position at the centre and take up the risk to assume the social location of the periphery. This is a more radical move than strategically adopting the language and aesthetics of the marginal, as it demands that the expressions of Christian faith should not only be speaking *to* the margin but speaking *from* the margin. It implicates relocating the undertaking of theological reflections and expressions away from the powerful centre toward the powerless

21 Joerg Rieger, *God and the Excluded: Visions and Blind Spots in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

22 This portrayal of God is consistent throughout various parts of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament; see Chapter 5 footnote 80. While this understanding of God may have been popularised by Latin American liberation theology in recent decades, it is also accepted across various Christian traditions. For a Latin American liberation theology perspective, see: Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1983); for an African Roman Catholic treatment of the subject, see: Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Catholic Social Teachings* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1982); for a western evangelical discussion, see: Stephen Charles Mott *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

23 This notion of 'social location' of theology is inspired by the discussion in Rieger, *God and the Excluded*, 188ff.

margin. It is only by this social relocation that expressions of faith can truly assume the thought pattern of the poor and thus adopt the language and aesthetics of the grassroots. By so doing, expressions of faith can respond to the practical and contextual theological challenges posed by the social reality as well as its cinematic manifestations.

This, however, is what local Christian films as expressions of faith have not tried to achieve. As evidenced in the sample of Christian productions discussed in Chapter Two, not only are the stories centred around the world of the middle class, the professionals, the well educated and the like, but the values they celebrate and the aesthetic preference they exhibit are often those of the upper middle class. As public expressions of faith, they are made from a location that is close to the centre, the privileged and the powerful. As such, this social location could be an alienating factor which distances expressions of Christian faith from the people who perceive themselves as marginal and those who are grappling with the reality or potential of poverty.

In his critical reflection of the task of theology and proposal for a new paradigm, Joerg Rieger states that 'without developing respect and openness for others at a time when social and other forces try to pull us deeper and deeper into the circles of exclusion, theology will hardly be able to make good in its well-intentioned attempts to become more open to God'.²⁴ Echoing with the spirit of this statement and yet going one step further, I propose that a contextual practical

²⁴ Rieger, *God and the Excluded*, 194.

theology of the expression of faith in contemporary Hong Kong not only needs to open itself to the marginal; in order to be faithful to the Gospel of Christ and truthful to the people in that context, it has to relocate itself socioculturally, which also means to relocate politically and economically.

7C.3. *Embrace the Contingent Liminality of the People*

The third feature of my proposed contextual approach is to embrace the contingent liminality experienced by the people. This corresponds to the most important characteristic that I have identified from the popular cinema, namely its engagement with some of the issues that are at a fundamental level confronting many Hong Kong people and are thus significant for the society as a whole. I pointed out earlier in this chapter (Section 7B) that there are four major issues that consistently emerge from the films – the question of unresolved identity, the tension between remembering and forgetting, the anxiety over marginalisation, and the quest for transformation from undesirable situations. Regarding the films as stories that represent the situation of local people, these issues should then be considered the main thematic components of the Hong Kong stories. By mapping out a holistic picture which uncovers the interrelationship among these four themes, I also suggested that together these themes point to a central phenomenon, namely the liminality of the people of Hong Kong before and after the change of sovereignty. In other words, the four issues identified from the cinema are the manifestations of this overarching liminal condition, and hereby I shall call them the sub-issues. It should be noted that while the overarching issue of liminality and the sub-issues are of substantive importance in a specific geo-historical space, they are contingent rather

than eternal in nature. The particular issues that are fundamental to the people and its society may shift with the change of circumstances. Having said that, however, a contextual practical theology which seeks to inform Christian praxis of expressing faith in a concrete situation can hardly shy away from this core issue of liminality as well as its manifestation in the cluster of interrelated sub-issues.

In its original usage in cultural anthropology, liminality refers to the middle stage in a ritual of transition. The concept was first used by Arnold Van Gennep in the early twentieth century in the study of folklore but it was not further developed until half a century later by Victor Turner. Van Gennep observed that there were typically three phases in rites of passage: separation, *marge* or *limen*, and re-aggregation.²⁵ In the 1960s Victor Turner revitalised the concept and applied it to his study of Central African rituals. He focused his attention on the middle stage in which participants were 'betwixt and between' two identities, as he regarded it to be most interesting 'on account of its implications for a general theory of sociocultural processes',²⁶ and coined the terms 'liminal' and 'liminality' to refer to this middle stage. Later he extended the concept to a variety of other processual rituals which involved larger groups and communities, and referred to them as 'public liminality'.²⁷

In light of Turner's theory, I thus understand the sociocultural process of

25 Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1960; original French edition: *Les Rites de Passage*, 1909).

26 Victor Turner, 'Variations on a Theme of Liminality', 36.

27 Victor Turner, 'Frame, Flow, and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 6.4 (1979): 465-499.

Hong Kong's transition from British colonial rule to Chinese sovereignty as public liminality, and the city's residents as being collectively in a liminal stage at the beginning of the twenty first century. The descriptions of them as having marginal and uncertain identities, of struggling between remembering and forgetting, and of longing for transforming to their new identities, are characteristic of those being 'betwixt and between' in Turner's notion. With this understanding, a major challenge for Christian praxis in the expression of faith is whether or not it can identify with and even immerse in this state of liminality in order to be totally in touch with the uncertainties and insecurity that liminal people feel. This identification and immersion in the life-situation of the common people echoes with my aforementioned notion of the social relocation of theological endeavours. It is only by repositioning its primary standpoint to where the people are that Christian expressions of faith can be a credible voice among them.

Nevertheless, to immerse oneself in the liminal situation of the people does not necessarily entail a total embrace of the uncertainty and insecurity. As Turner points out, liminality is also 'full of potency and potentiality' and 'full of experiment and play',²⁸ as it is often in the public rituals that a society tends to find ways of 'commenting on and critiquing itself'.²⁹ Public liminality is thus an opportunity where 'new ways of modelling or framing social reality may actually be proposed and sometimes legitimated'.³⁰ That is to say, there is a constructive aspect to being in a liminal situation, which is the opportunity for a group or community to re-imagine

28 Turner, 'Frame, Flow, and Reflection', 466.

29 Turner, 'Frame, Flow, and Reflection', 467.

30 Turner, 'Frame, Flow, and Reflection', 474.

itself. In Turner's terminology, there is a sense of 'plural reflexivity' involved, in which the society 'seeks to portray, understand, and acts on itself'.³¹ Hence, to be immersed in the people's liminality does not stop at identifying with their collective uncertainties and insecurities; it is also to participate in and contribute to the society's plural reflexivity, self-understanding, self-critique, and experimentation toward future possibilities. This constitutes a concrete challenge for the expression of Christian faith in public, namely, to be part of this larger exercise of plural reflexivity while in the process putting forth its vision of transformation for the people to consider.

While it is of primary importance that the expressions of Christian faith address the overarching issue of liminality as a whole, the concrete situations of the here-and-now must not be swept aside as being less important. Hence the sub-issues that manifest the present liminality should also be in consideration. Among the four sub-issues, marginalisation might be the one most consciously felt by many local people, as evidenced in the numerous discussions on the topic in Hong Kong media over the past few years.³² Nonetheless the concerns of Hong Kong people, as suggested in these discussions, are largely focused on the possible marginalisation of the city in face of the rapid development of their sovereign state. That is to say, what worries them is that Hong Kong could be outpaced by other Chinese cities in the process and decline in economic significance in the whole picture of the country and the world map. While admittedly Christians in their expressions of faith need to listen to and understand such views, the blindspots of these perspectives should also

31 Turner, 'Frame, Flow, and Reflection', 465.

32 See discussions in Chapter 5 and Section 7B.

be noted and challenged. First of all, these mainstream viewpoints often focus on the economic power of China and seldom address the complex relationship of China's economic growth to the increasingly interdependent global market economy. Second, many of the mainstream discussions reduce the marginalisation of Hong Kong to mean the weakening of the city's competitive advantage, whereas the well-being of the marginal in the local society is often set aside. The idea of maintaining the advantage of the city as a whole is often articulated at the expense of the marginal and the poor within the city, as if they are not part of the society.³³ This is an important front on which the power of the social relocation of the expressions of Christian faith can be manifested. It is only by relocating to the periphery that the hardships of the common people in the changing economy would become a primary concern in Christian praxis. By no means does this imply that the mainstream anxiety of being overwhelmed by the Chinese economy is to be ignored. It means however that when expressions of Christian faith take into account the prevailing social anxiety, they are undertaken from the perspective of the downtrodden marginal who often bears the brunt of the city's economic crises. By so doing, Christians are to go beyond the narrative of the society's mainstream which often assumes the position of the privileged class at the expense of the well-being of the marginal.

Another of the sub-issues that has come into the conscious attention of many

33 For instance, the discussion on legislating for minimum wage for workers in Hong Kong has carried on for years and is often dominated by the viewpoints of the employers. They often express views that are strongly against the idea of legislating for minimum wage, which they regard as a threat to a free market economy and to the competitive advantages of Hong Kong in the face of fierce competition from elsewhere, including mainland China. Such viewpoints can be found, for example, in: 'The CMA's Opinion on Setting up the Minimum Wage and Maximum Working Hours in Hong Kong' (香港中華廠商聯合會對香港訂定最低工資及最高工時的意見) (The Chinese Manufacturers' Association of Hong Kong, 7 December 2004); also: Wong Kin Ming (黃健明), 'A Re-discussion on Minimum Wage' (再論最低工資), in *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 5 May 2008, 32.

Hong Kong people is the question of retaining versus foregoing memory,³⁴ which is closely tied to the problem of unresolved identity. In his theological treatment on memory, Miroslav Volf reflects on his experience in the Balkan context, with its suffering of violence and oppression in recent history; his main concern is therefore how to 'remember rightly' for the healing of past wounds.³⁵ In the present Hong Kong context, however, there is a different preoccupation regarding memory, namely the preservation of collective memory and the local heritage it represents. As mentioned earlier (section 6B), the actions against the demolition of the Star Ferry Pier (late 2006) and Queen's Pier (summer 2007) exemplify a rising awareness of preserving collective memories.³⁶ According to Irwin-Zarecka, collective memory is understood 'not as a collection of individual memories or some magically constructed reservoir of ideas and images, but rather as socially articulated and socially maintained 'reality of the past' '.³⁷ It is 'one of the most important symbolic resources' that a society can have, and 'imbued as it often is with quasi-sacred meanings and capable of evoking very powerful emotions'.³⁸ Hence, the fact that an increasing number of people in Hong Kong have become concerned with collective memory is suggestive of the society's identity being at stake. This corresponds with

34 See section 7B for details.

35 Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

36 Admittedly not all in Hong Kong would agree that these actions are about preserving collective memory. For example, an insider to the movement states that they are against over-development of the city. See: Yip Yin(頁言), 'Is It Only about Collective Memory?' (豈止是集體回憶?), in *inmediahk.net*, 11 February 2007 <http://www.inmediahk.net/public/article?item_id=194159&group_id=259> [accessed 16 October 2007]. Yet the author of this article does acknowledge that the movement is at least partly concerned with collective memory.

37 Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 54.

38 Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance*, 67.

the observation of Anthony Cheung, who regards the tide of protecting old landmarks as an indicator that a few years after the reversion of sovereignty, the city is need of, and indeed undergoing a process of, redefining itself and reconstructing its own identity.³⁹

In this context of redefinition and reconstruction, it is important for Christians to engage with these questions of memory and identity in their expressions of faith in the public realm, not because of the potential of drawing attention but because of their substantive significance to the people, their society and beyond. Collective or shared memories, as Irwin-Zarecka points out, 'provides for a sense of belonging' by 'their very existence'; and 'without the sharing of memories, it is difficult, if not impossible to conceive of social bonding, on whatever a scale'.⁴⁰ In addition to the function of creating bonding in a society, the memories of heritage also play a vital role in shaping, maintaining, and expressing identity. This is crisply articulated in the following statement by Jan Assmann:

Through its cultural heritage a society becomes visible to itself and to others. Which past becomes evident in that heritage and which values emerge in its identificatory appropriation tells us much about the constitution and tendencies of a society.⁴¹

39 Anthony Cheung, 'Defining Hong Kong, Reconstructing Identity', *Mingpao Daily News*, 19 September 2007, Forum Page.

40 Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance*, 54.

41 Jan Assmann, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', in *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 133.

Whereas collective or shared memories are instrumental in the reconstruction and definition of the people's identity, it should nevertheless be noted that a people's vested energy in this regard can run the risk of becoming obsessive or even idolatrous. It is often achieved by defining an 'other' as the object of exclusion. This has in fact been the case in Hong Kong throughout the 1980s and 1990s, during which the media, such as television dramas and films, have played a major role in creating the image of the Chinese mainlander as opposed to Hong Kong locals.⁴² Thus, as Miroslav Volf once commented in his exploration on the issue, 'It may not be too much to claim that the future of our world will depend on how we deal with identity and difference.'⁴³ While Christians should not shy away from these important issues in their expressions of faith in the public realm, they must at the same time maintain a critical stance toward any possible self-idolatrous tendency in the society's identity construction. There must be a hermeneutics of suspicion to problematise those narratives that uphold the ultimate supremacy of the local identity and the absolute importance of shared memory within a community, lest these become the rationale for exclusivity to the others.

While the anxiety over marginalisation is most consciously felt by the people and the problems of memory and identity are at the core, a closer look at the four interrelated issues within the Hong Kong context would suggest that the quest for transformation commands priority in practice. That is to say, many people in Hong Kong would articulate a yearning for transformation either on a personal level or

42 An in-depth study has shown how Hong Kong television serial drama during that time has framed mainland Chinese as 'the other' and thus served as an identity demarcation for local people. See: Eric K.W. Ma, *Culture, Politics and Television in Hong Kong* (London: Routledge, 1999).

43 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 20.

collective level or both. It represents, consciously, an urge to avert the fate of downtroddenness and, not so consciously, a desire to redefine self and society. In the language of liminality, it is the longing to terminate the uncertainties that result from fluid identity and to migrate into a new status. In Christian theological terms, there is a language of redemption and a language of hope implied.⁴⁴ In this regard, the challenge confronting the expressions of Christian faith in public is whether or not the communicator can articulate a vision for transformation which is neither individualistic nor other-worldly, but instead engages the people in their daily social reality rather than offering a narrative of hope which promises to redeem them away from their real life. As local public theologian Kung Lap Yan suggests in his recent reflection on the local circumstances, Hong Kong people need 'the courage to remember while not being confined by memory, the audacity to challenge the prevailing symbols in the society but not to rebel without a cause, the determination to construct spaces [for the future] which are not to be a space that cannot include the other'.⁴⁵

7C.4. *Concluding Remarks*

In this section, I have discussed the major features of a contextual approach to the expressions of Christian faith in the public realm, in particular but not confined

⁴⁴ While the notions of redemption and hope are of central importance in Christian theology, they do appeal to a general human yearning. Redemption is said to be 'common to many religions, being based on the desire of man [sic] to delivered from sin, suffering, and death' ('Redemption', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd Revised Edition, ed. F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1382. Dillingstone also affirms, 'It is because of the manifold ways in which humans have felt themselves to be confined, oppressed, threatened, doomed that the prospect of *redemption* has captured the human imagination.' (F.W. Dillistone, 'Redemption', in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden (London: SCM, 1983), 487-488 [487]. (original italics))

⁴⁵ Kung Lap Yan, *Post 97 Hong Kong Dream Life*, xv.

to the popular cinematic media. In accordance with my tripolar orientation of being practical, contextual, and cultural, and on the basis of my findings in the insights from the popular cinema, I propose that a contextual approach to the Christian praxis of expressions of faith for Hong Kong should be characterised by three basic features. First, it should regard local cultural-religious traditions with attentiveness and humility. Second, it needs to assume the perspective and the social location of the marginal. Third, it has to engage with the contingent issue of liminality of the people which, in this specific temporal-spatial context, manifests itself as the anxiety over marginalisation, the uncertainties in identity, the tension between remembering and forgetting, as well as the quest for transformation. The common thread behind all three of these features in my proposed approach is the connectedness to the life-context of the people. Alternatively speaking, it is to be in touch with the 'structure of feeling' of the people. To do so implicates that local Christian churches on the whole need to be 'religious interreligiously', to relocate the standpoint of theological endeavours to the periphery, as well as to submerge into and identify with the liminal condition in which the people are involved. To use the language of Christian missiology, this means that expressions of faith in the public realm need to be incarnational.⁴⁶

7D. Further Implications for Christian Praxis and Contextual Theology

In the course of this study, two elements have emerged that have significant

⁴⁶ I am aware of the controversy over whether it is appropriate to use the paradigm of incarnation in any Christian ministry and whether Christians can be incarnational at all, since Christ is the only one who can incarnate and has incarnated. Yet, as Ross Langmead has pointed out in his extensive study in the subject, the incarnational paradigm is indeed central to Christian mission across all major traditions over different historical periods. See: Ross Langmead, *The Word Made Flesh: Toward an Incarnational Missiology* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2004).

implications for the praxis of faith expressions in public and the construction of theology. For public expressions of Christian faith to be appropriate to the sociocultural circumstances in post-1997 Hong Kong, I propose that, first, they need to tell stories of contemporary Hong Kong which can be owned by the people as local stories; second, these expressions of faith need to be informed by a local theology which can embody and address the people's life-situation in the transitory sociocultural, political, and economic circumstances.

7D.1. *Toward Contextual Stories of Post-1997 Hong Kong*

Throughout the chapters on film analysis, I find that the most well-received popular films in Hong Kong in the early years of the twenty first century are in essence dramatised representations of the situation of the people and their society during the transition of sovereignty. More importantly, they are claimed and owned by the local audience and critics as telling the people's own stories. These stories echo with the structure of feelings of the people, manifest the fundamental issues that are confronting the society, and in their own ways offer solutions to the problems in question. Thereby, the popular cinema poses a challenge to the Christian communities in Hong Kong as to whether or not they can tell their compelling versions of the Hong Kong story.

While previous attempts in a similar direction are uncommon among Hong Kong, Chinese, or East Asian Christians, they are not totally unknown. One of the most well known preceding endeavours in telling local stories as expression of faith and theology is C.S. Song's *The Tears of Lady Meng*.⁴⁷ In his book, Song retold an

⁴⁷ Choan-Seng Song, *The Tears of Lady Meng: A Parable of People's Political Theology* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981).

ancient Chinese folklore about how a young widow resisted against the abuse and oppression of an authoritarian emperor, and injected into the old story a liberation theological reinterpretation,⁴⁸ thus the subtitle 'a parable of people's political theology'. Being a native of Taiwan, Song borrowed a well known narrative from ancient China to express the experience of oppression and hope for liberative reversal in modern Taiwan, making the book a companion to his *Third-eye Theology*.⁴⁹ He later continued with his attempts in theology from storytelling by gathering contemporary stories of people from different Asian societies and, as in his treatment of *Lady Meng*, interpreted them with a lens of liberation theology.⁵⁰ With the exception of *Lady Meng*, however, Song's endeavours often attempted to cast too wide a net when he tried to address what he called Asian people, Asian stories, and Asian theologies in a general sense. Given the vast diversity across different Asian nations and societies in terms of their cultural and religious traditions, socio-economic conditions, and value systems, among other things, it is dubious whether one can discuss the issues of Asia with a homogeneous undertone without becoming overly general and thereby undermining the cause of contextual theology.⁵¹

48 According to R.S. Sugirtharajah, the reliance on 'Asian folklore and stories rather than Marxism for social analysis' is one of the distinctive characteristics of Asian liberation theologies, in which these stories are 'used to expose, challenge, and lament the injustices and the absurdities of the society'. This and other characteristics differentiate Asian liberation theologies from Latin American liberation theologies initiated by Gustavo Gutiérrez *et al.* See: R.S. Sugirtharajah, 'Liberation Theologies: Asian' in *The SCM Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, ed. Virginia Fabella and R.S. Sugirtharajah (London: SCM, 2003), 129-131 [130].

49 Choan-Seng Song, *Third-eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Settings* (Guildford: Lutterworth Press, 1980).

50 C. S. Song, *The Believing Heart: An Invitation to Story Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

51 Another point of critique on C.S. Song concerning his credibility as a voice in Asian or East Asian Theology is his long time physical detachment from any Asian context. He left Taiwan and has been working in the USA since 1970 (1970-73, Reformed Church of America), and then in Geneva (1973-82, WCC; 1982-85, World Alliance of Reformed Churches), and has been teaching

Specifically within the Hong Kong context, similar attempts of telling local stories as faith or theological expressions is relatively unknown. To the best of my knowledge, the only conscious exception in this regard is a small Chinese book entitled *Doing Theology with Hong Kong People's Stories* (香港人、故事、神學).⁵² Published in the mid 1990s, it is a collection of short essays from a symposium that involves a small circle of theologians, church ministers, and other Christian workers. As a pioneering work in the local scene, essays in this book include basic concepts of doing contextual theology and narrative theology, personal reflections of some authors on their own life-stories as Christians, and preliminary suggestions of theological reflections on the experience of certain specific communities. There are also some discussions on what the editor calls the 'collective stories' of Hong Kong people in face of the imminent sovereignty handover and the resulting drastic societal changes. Nevertheless, almost none of the authors have truly attempted to put forth a theology in a narrative form or a theology based on a story. In short, as a first attempt in Hong Kong, the book is an initial suggestion toward using local stories as theological resources and also toward doing theology in the form of storytelling. In a broader sense, it is a call for the Christian communities to pay more serious theological attention to the contemporary Hong Kong experience.

It has been more than a decade since the call from the aforementioned book

in the Pacific School of Religion (Berkeley, California) since 1985. (Source: 'Choan-Seng Song: A Curriculum Vitae', dated 30 December 2002; from the Pacific School of Religion Faculty Profile: <http://www.psr.edu/page.cfm?l=139> [accessed 28 November 2007]). To date he has not been based in Taiwan or any Asian society for almost four decades. This issue is, however, beside the main concern of my discussion.

52 Agatha M.Y. Wong (黃美玉), ed. *Doing Theology with Hong Kong People's Stories* (香港人、故事、神學) (Hong Kong: Christian Institute, 1996).

to do theology with Hong Kong people's stories, but to the best of my knowledge, serious attempts in a similar direction are yet to be seen.⁵³ In the present time after Hong Kong has come under the Chinese flag, the cultural texts which I have studied indicate that there is a whole new set of issues confronting the people in the altered circumstances. For expressions of faith of local Christians to be in touch with this changed and changing context, local churches must wrestle to engage seriously with the Hong Kong experience of the early twenty first century. It is by so doing that Christians can tell stories of Hong Kong which are deeply rooted in the life-situations of the people, and concomitantly point toward a vision of hope that goes beyond the prevalent cinematic visions and other popular media narratives. To borrow Crossan's notion of story and parable,⁵⁴ these Christian versions of the Hong Kong stories need to be embedded in the life-experience of the people without at the same time accepting the conventional notion of how things should be. It should bring a dissonant shock to the audience because it often challenges their commonly held beliefs or expectations, and point them toward a possibility of transcendence. In Hong Kong in the early twenty first century, the burden is on the local Christian communities to discern those daily practices and beliefs that are taken for granted by many but need to be critiqued and rejected in order to be able to imagine new visions toward the future.⁵⁵ Thence, it is possible to tell Christian parables of Hong Kong

53 In his discussion of doing theology with Asian cultural resources, Hong Kong scholar Kwok-keung Yeung also proposes the use of stories told in the popular media and not only the classical texts (what he calls the 'raw materials') in theological endeavours. While his emphasis is more on building the identity of Asian theology beyond an 'anti-imperialistic framework', his suggestion of using popular cultural resources and the example he uses (Hong Kong cinema and television) does resonate with my concern in this thesis. See: Kwok-keung Yeung, 'Representing "Asia" in the Globalising World: Revisiting the Idea of Doing Theology with Asian Cultural Resources', in *Journal of Theology and Culture in Asia*, 1 (2002): 135-156.

54 John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Somona, California: Polebridge Press, 1988). Crossan suggests that a parable is essentially a story that subverts the world's accepted convention.

55 In his collection of short essays which reflect on ordinary life in Hong Kong after the reversion of

that resonate with the lives of the people.

7D.2. *Toward a Local Theology of Post-1997 Hong Kong*

In order to be able to tell stories of Hong Kong in their expressions of faith, the local churches not only need critical discernment over the prevalent practices and beliefs in the city but, more fundamentally, a theology that embodies the life-experience of the people. When compared to Chinese churches in other regions, theological reflection in Hong Kong are said to be 'highly vigorous and very much up to the task of pointing the way for the church in response to the rapid socio-political changes in Hong Kong'.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, theological projects which directly engage with the concrete here-and-now are not common.

In the years approaching the change of sovereignty, especially in the 1980s when the issue was first brought to the attention of the majority of the people, there had been efforts among local Christians to reflect theologically on the Hong Kong experience of that period and grapple with the implications of becoming part of China. The earliest recorded endeavours in this regard can be traced to two edited volumes in Chinese, namely *1997 and Hong Kong Theology* (一九九七與香港神學)

sovereignty, theologian Kung Lap Yan states that 'the symbols [widely accepted] in our life-world have become problematic ... but we still cling on to them ... As a result, we do not have the space to create our lives'. He suggests that some of the problematic common phenomena include the 'slavery of the middle class to economic life, the ever worsening poverty of the poor, extremely low social mobility, the dominance of the stock market, etc.' (From: Kung, 'Preface: The World of Our Lives', in *Post 97 Dream Life in Hong Kong*, xiv-xv.) While his list of problematic phenomena may need further scrutiny, his work represents a small but important step which resonates with my proposal.

56 Carver T. Yu, 'Theological Development of the Hong Kong Christian Community in the Last Forty Years', *China Graduate School of Theology Journal* 25 (1998): 103-132 [130]. In my opinion, Yu's appraisal of the situation tends to be generous and optimistic.

⁵⁷ as well as *1997: Change and Renewal* (一九九七：轉變與更新).⁵⁸ Significantly, they were published only a few months apart in 1983 – which was a year of extreme turbulence in the Sino-British negotiations over the city's future and, consequently, also a time of fragility in the overall mood among Hong Kong people.⁵⁹ As collections of papers presented in symposia held earlier that year, both books represented some of the earliest efforts of local Christian leaders and theologians to look seriously into the religious and sociocultural implications of the political transition to come. They were attempts in doing theologies to embody and address the sociocultural and political-economic experience in Hong Kong during the early stage of the transition.

The most ambitious attempt at constructing a full-fledged Hong Kong theology, however, was the series of works by Arnold M.K. Yeung under the theme of 'theology of reconciliation'. It began with a paper⁶⁰ and culminated in his seminal *Theology of Reconciliation and Church Renewal* (復和神學與教會更新).⁶¹ In this

⁵⁷ Kwok Pui-lan (郭佩蘭), ed., *1997 and Hong Kong Theology* (Hong Kong: Chung Chi College Theology Division, 1983).

⁵⁸ Benny Chin (錢北斗), ed., *1997: Change and Renewal* (Hong Kong: Fellowship of Evangelical Students, 1983).

⁵⁹ In 1983, regular meetings between China and Britain virtually came to a standstill. In late September, after the British representatives withdrew from the negotiations, China announced that it would consider resuming sovereignty over Hong Kong on its own at any time if the British were not to return to the meeting table. Panic immediately set in in the city. On Friday, 23 September, the value of the Hong Kong Dollar plummeted; many supermarkets were packed with anxious customers, the shelves for staple food and necessities were emptied within hours, price tags were changed several times within the same day. On the following morning, the local currency came close to the level of HKD 10 to USD 1, down from the original rate of around HKD 6 to USD1 just two days before.

⁶⁰ Arnold Yeung (楊牧谷), 'Review and Preview of Local Theology: an Initial Proposal to the Theology of Reconciliation' (本土神學回顧與前瞻：復和神學芻議), in *1997 and Hong Kong Theology*, ed. Kwok Pui-lan, 88-119.

⁶¹ Arnold Yeung (楊牧谷), *Theology of Reconciliation and Church Renewal* (復和神學與教會更新) (Hong Kong: Seed Press, 1987).

book, Yeung affirmed that the church should side with the common people who had no choice but to stay in the city to bear the brunt of the socio-political change, unlike many from the middle and upper class who could choose to emigrate to other countries. He further affirmed that Biblically and historically, reconciliation was a central theme in the Christian faith and proposed that it was particularly meaningful for the transitory circumstances of Hong Kong in that era. In that specific historical moment, he saw the need to reconcile the people of Hong Kong with China and suggested it to be the key mission of the church as the city approached reunification with its mother country. Though the overall reaction from local Christians was sceptical,⁶² the theology of reconciliation represented a substantial effort by an independent scholar⁶³ to reflect theologically on the concrete socio-political situation of Hong Kong and endeavoured to work out a comprehensive contextual theological framework on the basis of that Hong Kong experience.

Subsequently in the early 1990s, Raymond Fung, on behalf of the Hong Kong Christian Institute, proposed a 'theology at the mainland's periphery' (陸緣神學).⁶⁴ He emphasised the position of Hong Kong being at the periphery of mainland

62 At the time the general mood of most people in Hong Kong was pessimistic toward the change of sovereignty and critical toward China. Also, 'reconciliation' was exactly the theme advocated by the official Three-Self Church in China in the early 1980s when it started to interact with the world as the country reopened. Responses to Yeung's works from theologians and Christian leaders of different theological positions were far from enthusiastic. According to Jason Yeung, a former student of Arnold Yeung and the editor of the revised edition of the book in 2003, no response, rejoinder, or review on Yeung's theological proposal or the book had appeared within ten years after the publication of *Theology of Reconciliation and Church Renewal*. See: Jason Yeung (楊慶球), 'The Process and Meaning of Writing Theology of Reconciliation' (復和神學的寫作歷程及意義), *Christian Times* 853 (4 January 2004), Readers' Forum.

63 Arnold M.K. Yeung (楊牧谷 1945-2002) taught theology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong for six years after completing his PhD at Cambridge University in 1981. In 1987 he left the Chinese University and committed himself to full-time writing, preaching, and other speaking engagements until his sudden death in January 2002 during a vacation with his wife in the UK.

64 Raymond Fung (馮煒文), 'A First Step in the Theology of the Mainland's Periphery' (陸緣神學的

China geographically, culturally, and politically, and suggested that any contextual theology for Hong Kong had to be done in consideration of this reality. He called for community participation to construct such a theology and stressed that it is not to be the effort of any single person. There was, however, no evidence of the discussion being continued after that particular issue of the journal.

These efforts by both Yeung and Fung were published more than one and a half decades ago. The circumstances of the city and its people had altered drastically ever since, especially after a few years into the Chinese sovereignty. By far, to the best of my knowledge, no other attempts of comparable scale or vision have emerged from the Hong Kong theological scene.⁶⁵ That is to say, a new contextual theology which attends to the current local experience after the reversion of sovereignty and the turn of the century is yet to appear.

In my proposal for a contextual approach of expressions of faith, I point out that the people of Hong Kong are in these years entangled in a state of liminality and I propose that the local church should engage with this liminality seriously from a theological perspective. This proposal implicates the need for developing a theology of liminality which can embody and address the liminal situation of contemporary Hong Kong people. Although so far this particular concept from cultural

起步), in *Reflection* (思) 22 (October-November, 1992): 8-12.

65 There were certainly many titles of theological works of different emphases being produced locally over the years, and some of them did attempt to address various public issues in the city. Yet substantial publications of local theology that dealt with the concrete experience of the here and now in a holistic manner were rare. A revised edition of *Theology of Reconciliation and Church Renewal* was published in 2003, with the initiation of the Arnold Yeung's widow and edited by Jason Yeung, a former student of the author. In this revised edition, however, most of the contextual sections that were directly in conversation with the social situation at the time of the original writing were edited out.

anthropology has not captured much attention from theologians anywhere, there are a small number of suggestions of adopting liminality into the understanding of Christian rituals such as worship service⁶⁶ and baptism.⁶⁷ There are also attempts which use the notion as an interpretive framework for certain central themes in Christian theology. For instance, Douglas Davies suggests that the whole life of Jesus on earth can be understood as the liminal period of the Son in the Holy Trinity,⁶⁸ whereas B.J. Oropeza borrows Turner's theory of liminality to interpret Paul's teaching in I Corinthians 10: 1-12 and regards the wilderness experience of the Israelites as their liminal stage in the rite of passage.⁶⁹ More ambitiously, Christian Strecker applies the concept of liminality as an encompassing paradigm to study the life and theology of the Apostle Paul.⁷⁰ He calls Pauline theology a '*liminale Theologie*' and argues, among other things, for Paul's understanding of the present age as a liminal period and the cross as a liminal symbol for the believers. While these examples cited here have little to do with contextual theology, they do suggest that the concept of liminality is applicable to theological endeavours as an interpretive framework and that there are workable Biblical resources in this regard.

For local Christians to engage with the life experience of the general public

66 J. Randall Nichols, 'Worship as Anti-Structure: The Contribution of Victor Turner', *Theology Today*, 41.4 (1985), 401-409.

67 Kelton Cobb, *Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 124-127.

68 Douglas Davies, *Anthropology and Theology* (Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2002), 128. Though a highly imaginative idea, it is only a passing remark to which Davies has devoted a short paragraph.

69 B.J. Oropeza, 'Apostasy in the Wilderness: Paul's Message To the Corinthians in a State of Eschatological Liminality', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 22.75 (1999): 69-86.

70 Christian Strecker, *Die Liminale Theologie des Paulus: Zugänge zur Paulinischen Theologie aus Kulturanthropologischer Perspektive* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999).

in contemporary Hong Kong, they need a solid theology which is compatible with the current real-life situation of the people and the society. If the city as I have suggested is collectively in the midst of a liminal condition, then Christians in their expressions of faith need to be informed and enriched by the insights from a vigorous theology of liminality. I do not imply that a theology of liminality is the only theology which can embody the present life-experience in Hong Kong, or that post-1997 Hong Kong theology is equivalent to liminal theology. Nonetheless, informed by the insights extracted from my analysis of the contemporary cinema as a cultural text, I would insist that liminality is an appropriate and dynamic framework for interpreting the here-and-now in the city. Hence, a theology of liminality which awaits to be developed could be a powerful paradigm for engaging theologically with the people in Hong Kong in the early twenty first century.

7D.3. *Contextual Parables and Contextual Theology:*

a Two-Pronged Approach to Public Expressions of Faith

These two aspects discussed above, post-1997 local stories and post-1997 theology, are the necessary components of the expression of Christian faith in public in the context of early twenty first century Hong Kong. More importantly, they are interrelated and interdependent of each other. Without a solid theology that can embody and address the people's life-experience within the concrete context, the stories told would tend to be empty and can hardly command the power of parables. Concomitantly, without the narrative expression, the constructed local theology would likely be manifested in abstract terms and hardly enter the life-situation of the people. They are thus the two prongs of the public expression of Christian faith; the lack of either one of them would result in a deficient expression of Christian faith in

context.

While the concrete content of the theology in question and the details of the parables are bound to vary from society to society, I believe that the spirit and basic orientation of this two-pronged approach to the public expression of Christian faith are applicable to some other, if not most, contexts across different social, cultural, economic, and political situations. This, I hope, is the ecumenical value of this study and the proposal it contains.

7E. Implications beyond This Thesis:

A theology of popular audiovisual media in contemporary Chinese cultural context

While the notion of developing contextual parables and contextual theology have adequately fulfilled the purpose of this study, there is an indirectly related issue which emerges in the course of my research on the practical context and which demands further attention in the future. This particular issue is the lack of theological sensitivity to the popular audiovisual media within the Protestant circle in Hong Kong. Over the second half of the twentieth century, the attitude of many Hong Kong Christians toward the popular media has evolved from that of suspicious rejection to accommodation and use. As recently as the early 1980s, there were still churches and seminaries that discouraged and even prohibited their members and students from going to the cinema. Eventually, partly due to the gradual professionalisation of audiovisual ministries by local Christian groups,⁷¹ and also due

71 I have discussed this phenomenon in details elsewhere. See: Yam Chi-Keung, 'Engagement in Television by Protestant Christians in Hong Kong', *Studies in World Christianity* 11.1 (2005): 87-105.

to the rapid popularisation of various audiovisual media, explicit suspicion and rejection have apparently subsided. Yet, as I have observed, Christians from Hong Kong in fact adopt a pragmatic instrumental view of the media, considering the latter as tools for evangelism or Christian formation.⁷² This is especially conspicuous among Christian media practitioners themselves, such as those who produce the Christian films analysed in this thesis.⁷³ The sociocultural aspects of the media are virtually overlooked by most.

With regard to this, I would propose that there are two dimensions which await further research study. One is the investigation into the view of popular audiovisual media among local Christians – the historical development, the current situation, and its relationship to the overall theological outlook of the local churches. This is essentially an exploration of the prevalent theology of popular audiovisual media held by local Christians. It points to the second dimension for future study, which is the construction of a theology of popular audiovisual media in the contemporary Chinese cultural context. These works proposed for future undertaking would not only fill an academic lacuna but also further enrich the practical dimension of this thesis.

END OF THESIS

⁷² Yam, *ibid.*, 104-105.

⁷³ See Chapter 3 for details.

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